

**In or Out?:
The Impact of Discursive and Behavioural
Performance on Identity Construction among
Chicanas in Gangs**

**by
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Abstract

Despite the growing interest in female gang membership, there is a gap in the literature regarding the continual identity shifts that occur throughout Chicana female gang association, affiliation, and, especially during the disengagement process. This study seeks to understand the ways in which formerly gang-affiliated Chicanas negotiate their experiences and interactions and how these are implicated in their understanding of their own subjectivity. The research was conducted through twenty-four unstructured interviews with formerly gang-affiliated Chicanas involved with a prominent gang prevention/intervention organization in the Boyle Heights neighbourhood of East Los Angeles, and through observations conducted within the organization and within the neighbourhood.

The results demonstrate that identity is in a constant state of flux. The homegirls in this study were able to describe the ways in which their subjectivities have been (co)constructed in ways that were temporally and spatially relevant and how their interactions with the social environment, their communities, families, and their homeboys and homegirls were also implicated. Homegirls explained how their identities changed through different periods in their lives. From “doing gang” in their hoods and among their homeboys and homegirls, to performing gender and sexuality in prison, and then (re)constructing their raced, classed, and gendered identities as they negotiated the process of disengaging from the gang, participants demonstrated how their experiences and interactions played a role in their worldviews, the ways in which they understood their own subjectivities, and how these perceptions inform(ed) their decisions, both past and present.

Many of the findings support the extant literature describing the role of discursive and behavioral expression(s) in the (co)construction of identity, on an individual level and for “others.” Specifically, marginalized girls/women are subject to engaging in social practices in order to avoid rejection within their social milieu. The findings reveal that while gang-affiliated Chicanas do experience multiple forms of marginalization like many gang-affiliated girls/women, they have the added dimension of socio-cultural positioning. In other words, these women must actively negotiate the traditions, values, and expectations of two cultures: Mexican and American—a process that leads to a Chola identity and subculture.

Keywords: Chicana gangs; identity construction; gang performance; constrained agency; homegirls

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my mother, Jill Cohen Kolb, my father, William Kolb, and my sister, Leah Kolb for their unconditional love and support; and to the twenty-four women who shared their lives with me and made this possible.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Literature Review

In the past three decades, the rise of feminist criminology advanced the study of gangs from a male-centered phenomenon, in which little attention was paid to the role of females, to one which takes into account the very real, gendered experiences of young women (see, for example, Campbell, 1984; Chesney-Lind & Hagedorn, 1999; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Miller, 2001; Moore, 1991). More recent scholarship in this area led to new ways of conceptualizing female gang involvement. Scholars moved beyond Miller's (1975) tripartite classification of female gang members and away from simplistic categories which sexualized the roles of these young women (see Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991). We now know, however, that we cannot make generalizations about the nature of female gang membership (Hagedorn & Devitt, 1999; Klein, 1995). Factors such as age, gender, and ethnicity all play important roles in aiding our understanding of women involved in gangs. However, in order to gain a better understanding of what we do know about women in gangs, it is important to first review the extant literature, both quantitative and qualitative.

According to media reports and even some scholars, female gang affiliation is rapidly increasing and is becoming something that the public should fear (Chesney-Lind, 2010; Jones, 1993). Whether there is an increase in involvement of girls/women in gangs is a matter of debate among scholars as the number of girls and women who admit to being gang-affiliated varies from city to city and from study to study (Moore & Hagedorn, 2001). Despite the uncertainty that surrounds these arguments, we do have evidence which suggests that female gang membership is not as widespread as previously believed (J. Miller, 2002c). For example, there are proportionally fewer females in gangs than males, and females tend to commit less serious (and less violent) offences (Chesney-Lind, 1993). In addition, we now have estimates of the ratio of female

gang members to males and have a better understanding of the prevalence of female gang membership.

Statistics describing the percentage of females involved in gangs have varied considerably, reflecting variation in where the data were collected and the method(s) used to obtain the data. For example, in a review of the literature, Miller (2002c) reported female participation ranging from 20% to 46% of gang members (p. 178). In her own study of female gang members in Columbus, Ohio and St. Louis, Missouri, Miller (2001) found that depending on the gang female participation in mixed sex gangs ranged from 7% to 75%.

Esbensen and Winfree (1998) offer two methodological reasons for the discrepancy in prevalence rates: (a) law enforcement data tend to underrepresent female gang involvement (Curry, 1998); and (b) older girls were underrepresented in previous samples, possibly due to inconsistent operational definitions of “gang membership¹” (Decker, Van Gemert, & Pyrooz, 2009). For example, in Esbensen and Huizinga’s (1993) study, there was a “lower percentage of girl gang members as the sample aged” (p. 508). These findings are consistent with other research which suggests that girls tend to “age out” as they approach their late teens (see Maxson, Hennigan, & Sloane, 2005; Maxson & Whitlock, 2002; J. Miller, 2002a, 2002b).

Research has shown that females likely join gangs for different reasons than males (Esbensen & Deschenes, 1998; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Peterson, Miller, & Esbensen, 2001) Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Maxson & Whitlock, 2002; Miller, 2002c; Peterson, Miller, & Esbensen, 2001). Even with the neighbourhood characteristics remaining consistent for both male and female gang members, women nevertheless

¹ For a more complete discussion of the controversy in academia with respect to agreement upon an operational definition of what constitutes a gang, see Ball and Curry (1995) and Klein (1997). Ball and Curry concur with Conly (1993) that “[t]he confusion is so great that some advocate abandoning the term, maintaining that it can never be standardized because it is not a term used by youth themselves to reflect the actual empirical reality of their involvements but rather a relatively meaningless label thrown about by the adult community” (p.225). As such, debating definitional controversies related to gang membership is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Because the organization that served the participants in this study, and the participants themselves, identified the participants as gang or former gang members, I accepted that they were, in fact, gang or former gang members

have unique experiences which may draw them towards gang membership. Girls, for example, are more likely than boys to join gangs for socialization, protection, and relational aspects (Maxson & Whitlock, 2002; Miller, 2001, 2002c; Peterson et al. 2001). In addition, studies suggest gang-affiliated girls suffer from lower self-esteem and higher levels of social isolation than boys (Esbensen & Winfree, 1998; Esbensen, Deschenes, & Winfree, 1999). Despite these findings, Bjerregaard and Smith (1993) did not find any relationship between low self-esteem and gang membership for girls.²

In the past two decades, literature about female membership in gangs has proliferated (Maxson & Whitlock, 2002; Miller, 2002c) due to the apparent increase in violent behaviour perpetrated by girls. However, it remains questionable whether female participation in gangs and associated violent behaviour has indeed increased, or if the topic is simply of greater interest to researchers (Hagedorn, 1998; Maxson & Whitlock, 2002). Some scholars reject the notion that young women are becoming more violent and cite incendiary media reports as the source of misinformation (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1992; Chesney-Lind, 1993; Hagedorn & Devitt, 1999). Chesney-Lind (1993) argues that the media have a tendency to “demonize” poor women of colour for certain behaviours, “thereby making them responsible for their own marginalization, while simultaneously warning their more privileged white sisters of the ‘dark’ side of their efforts to seek a better life for women” (p. 295). Statistical reports reflecting changes in crime or increased arrest rates result in unfounded fear and public demands to “fix” the “gang problem” through punitive measures. These reactionary measures thus ignore the larger socio-structural factors responsible for fostering gang activity.

Socio-Structural Explanations for Female Gang Affiliation

Space and “Disorganization”

In his critique of the emergence of the “outcast ghetto,” Marcuse (1997) argues that post-Fordist, neo-liberal economic policy in the United States is responsible for the

² For a more detailed review of factors involved in female gang membership, please refer to the following section in which I discuss individually situated experiences and behaviours.

ghettoization and subsequent exclusion of certain groups within the socio-economic underclass. Although he specifically talks about the increase in social exclusionary practices perpetuated against African-Americans by those residing in “the citadel,”³ his arguments also poignantly describe features and conditions which closely resemble the barrios of East Los Angeles. Before discussing the specific features which make the barrios in East Los Angeles unique from other communities, or, social spaces, it is important to briefly define what Marcuse refers to as the “outcast ghetto,” and how these urban spaces have become so distinct in our current “post-industrial, post-Keynesian” (p. 229) economy.

The “outcast ghetto” is a spatially, and often racially, segregated area “[in which] the ghetto relationship is imposed from the outside by those with more power upon those with less” (Marcuse, 1997 p. 230). In other words, residents within the ghetto are forced into a position of inferiority because of certain characteristics, such as race, and generally lack any opportunities for upward mobility. The impact of deindustrialization and neo-liberal economic policies that favour conspicuous consumerism, outsourcing labour overseas, and free trade over domestic industry growth has left formerly self-sufficient individuals in these urban centers with few prospects for employment (Hagedorn 2005; Wilson, 1987). The disappearance of jobs and lack of revenue-generating industry within these areas has led to ghettoization and the subsequent emergence of a radicalized, underclass subculture (Wilson, 1987). These two factors are also, in part, responsible for the “barriozation” of East Los Angeles (Bogardus in Vigil 1988).⁴

Both Moore and Vigil trace the socio-political history of neighbourhoods in East Los Angeles, which are known to be hotbeds of gang activity. Each of these scholars describes how macro-level factors are implicated in the rise of gang activity, and how these factors have essentially created a ‘trickle-down’ effect. Moore (1991) argues that

³ Citadels are social spaces “established by higher-income, higher status groups” (Marcuse, 1997, p. 228).

⁴ A full socio-political examination of the barrios of East Los Angeles is beyond the scope of this section, but will be addressed in Chapter Two. The discussion here will be limited to noting major historical turning points that are socially, economically, and politically relevant to understanding the locale in which the current study takes place.

an increase in immigration from Mexico, as well as a decrease in unionized manufacturing jobs (particularly in the auto and steel industries) in the 1970s and 1980s, left Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans residing in East Los Angeles with few legitimate employment opportunities. Both Moore (1991) and Vigil (1988, 2007) show how social isolation resulting from deindustrialization and the subsequent 'ghettoization' of inner-city communities have impacted the rise in informal social networks.

In the 1920s the Boyle Heights area of East Los Angeles was a large, heterogeneous neighbourhood populated with residents from various ethnic backgrounds (Moore, 1991). At this time, a large number of Chicanos resided on the outskirts of East Los Angeles in unincorporated areas (Moore, 1991; Vigil 1988). Their domestic conditions were poor and they often lived in shacks pieced together with any materials they could find. During this time, Chicanos worked primarily as unskilled labourers in agriculture and on the railroad. Mexican immigration to other areas of East Los Angeles (e.g. El Hoyo Maravilla), coupled with the exodus of Jews and other ethnic groups from Boyle Heights, left East Los Angeles predominantly ethnically Chicano (Moore, 1991) in the 1930s. After World War II, the United States experienced an economic boom, but those residing in Boyle Heights never profited from it. When the 1950s saw further economic prosperity in the area because of the expansion of the aerospace industry, Chicanos in East Los Angeles again were excluded from jobs due to their lack of skills (the industry relied heavily on professionals rather than blue-collar workers), geographical distance from the plants (Moore, 1991), and inability to find transportation to these jobs. As the aerospace industry continued to grow during the 1970s, the number of Chicanos in the heavy industry sector continued to decline: steel and automobile manufacturing jobs were no longer in or near the East Los Angeles area; instead, Chicanos were relegated to working low-wage, non-unionized jobs in the service industry (Moore, 1991).

Lack of employment opportunities, areas densely populated with Mexican immigrants, and geographical segregation from other parts of the city all played a role in adaptation difficulties for residents in these areas (Vigil, 1988). Vigil (2007) explains that Pico Gardens, a housing project in East Los Angeles, was surrounded by abandoned

buildings and warehouses which used to house manufacturing jobs held by members of the community.

The obvious distress of the immediate physical space is symbolic of these residents' invisibility and marginality. Across the river, service jobs are available to Pico Gardens residents.... Residents seeking work in these places, however, compete with recent immigrants who are willing to accept minimum wage, or all too often, even less. (p. 31)

Geographical isolation, compounded by isolation from legitimate job markets and poor infrastructure, have been linked to a decrease in social capital and collective efficacy in neighbourhoods in East Los Angeles where gangs flourish (Moore, 1989; Vigil, 2007).

In his study on the rise of minority street gangs in the Midwest, Hagedorn (1988) explains how macro-level economic changes, with a particular emphasis on deindustrialization in large cities, led to joblessness and subsequent deprivation. The combined impact of these factors contributed significantly to the appreciable rise of gangs and gang activity. Structural factors resulting in part from the diminished number of available jobs—a defining characteristic of our current post-industrial economy—have been tied to an escalation in gang presence and gang activity, specifically homicide, which is likely the result of an increase in cocaine sales in the 1980s and an increase in drug sales in general (Hagedorn, 1998).⁵ Likewise, Wilson (1996) cites the impact of the disappearance of legitimate jobs in urban areas, and describes how this left fertile ground for an increased presence of gangs and gang activity. Hagedorn (2005) argues that in the wake of this socio-economic crisis, certain gang scholars have called for the government to “strengthen community institutions” (p. 157). However, these scholars have largely ignored the fact that neo-liberal capitalism, with its focus on big business, has left individuals in former working-class neighbourhoods with no economy or prospects for a legal means to generate income. Lack of legitimate avenues for

⁵ In the post-industrial era, gangs have changed from groups that “hang out” and fight occasionally with rival gangs to quasi-institutions which serve economic functions. Hagedorn (1998) argues there are two reasons for this change: 1) gangs need to “hustle”, or, creatively engage in any activity possible – specifically, drug sales—in order to survive; and 2) disappearance of jobs has meant that gang members stop “maturing out” in their late teens and remain affiliated because their lack of access to legitimate employment led them to depend upon street “hustles.”

economic advancement has led ghetto residents towards an illicit economy, which Hagedorn (2005) aptly refers to as the “ghetto employer” (p. 157).

In addition to economic factors, we cannot ignore the role culture and “choloization” play in our understanding of the proliferation of gangs and gang activities in barrios.⁶ Goode (2000) suggests that people raised within a minority culture may perceive the world and their environments differently than those who are a part of mainstream culture. As such, cultural context often influences one’s chosen adaptation technique or approach to a given set of circumstances. For example, there has been a considerable amount of literature that suggests African Americans experience the criminal justice system as a racist, unfair, and penalizing institution, whereas whites tend to interpret the same rules, policies, and practices as being impartial and free of racial bias (Hurwitz & Peffley, 2005). Meanwhile geographical, socio-economic, and political isolation of certain groups from mainstream culture leads to voicelessness. This often leads to marginalized groups being denied a forum in which to express their beliefs, values, and concerns and in many circumstances they may be actively discouraged from doing so. This prevents individuals from engaging in active solution-based problem-solving, a practice that leads to withdrawal from mainstream culture (W. Kolb, 2001). In his qualitative study of young, African American males, *Lives in the Balance*, Kolb (2001) illustrates how young, African-American boys resist mainstream culture through withdrawal from participation in their own education. Through their rejection of the traditional educational system, they are responsible for re-creating their own street culture within the school. By engaging in this practice, however, these boys never develop the skills or knowledge necessary to transcend their socio-economic situations. Similarly, Vigil (1988) traces the path through which Chicano/a gang members in the barrios eschew cultural “norms” (Mexican and American), engage in street socialization,

⁶ Choloization refers to a distinct subcultural identity that emerged in the barrios. While the term “cholo” has been used to refer to Mexican-American gang members, it does not necessarily imply gang membership, but rather an identity distinguished by unique dress, language, and cultural practices. While I argue that macro-structural factors are influential in shaping culture, and culture in turn, plays a role in choloization generally, and gang membership specifically, it is important to note that the majority of people residing in urban ghettos and barrios are not involved in gangs or gang activity (Miller, 2002c; Vigil, 1988). In fact, Bjerregaard and Smith (1993) report that fewer than 25% of youth residing in impoverished neighbourhoods become affiliated with gangs.

and subsequently face challenges which may keep them stagnant within their communities.

Vigil (1988) suggests that social isolation, coupled with macro-level strain and culture, leads to choloization of certain individuals residing within the barrios. In fact, he shows how interpersonal relationships among individuals residing in the barrio and interaction with various other institutions such as schools and law enforcement, have a strong influence on cholo culture and, in some cases, gangs: "For a small but considerable portion of the Chicano underclass population, the gang has taken over where other influences have failed" (Vigil, 1988, p. 35). In this case, feelings of disconnectedness from Mexican and American cultural norms and traditions, coupled with feelings of alienation by the very institutions they are taught to unquestioningly respect, influence the Chicano/a underclass to seek meaning and validation through cholo cultural identification and, in some cases gang affiliation. Interestingly, identification with certain, often cultural, influences and rejection of mainstream influences help facilitate a cholo subculture whereby individuals embody a distinct style both linguistically and in terms of dress.

Vigil (2002) addresses the idea of multiple marginalization as an important concept for understanding the alienation that Chicano/a youth experience and subsequent gang membership. Multiple marginalization is the idea that there exists a complex interplay of socio-structural factors such as race, class, gender, and cultural practices that work to marginalize youth (Vigil, 1988; 2007). This term refers to individuals who are left in the periphery of dominant white, middle-class culture and subsequently are forced to socialize with others who have been subjected to similar circumstances. Factors such as poverty, lack of employment, family and school problems, and individually-situated issues like substance abuse, all converge and have a direct impact in youth living in the barrios. Gender adds an additional dimension to this matrix of marginalization (Caldwell, 2010; Miller, 2001; Vigil, 2007). Young women experience further marginalization as a result of oppression due to gender and gendered expectations and gendered violence. For example, Jody Miller (2001) found that approximately 42% of the gang-involved girls she interviewed were physically attacked, and 52% had been sexually assaulted. Furthermore, although female gang members

often look to their gang as a means of escaping physical and sexual abuse in the home, they paradoxically find themselves at greater risk of experiencing victimization on the streets (Caldwell, 2010; Miller, 2001).

Despite qualitative accounts that describe the disorganized and neglected nature of urban ghettos and barrios due to structural changes in the economy, quantitative research has not uncovered correlations between the two factors. Using data from the Rochester Youth Development Study (RYDS), Bjerregaard and Smith (1993) did not find any association between gang membership and social disorganization or poverty. However, they suggest that this may, in part, be a result of sample selection. That is, they oversampled high-risk youth which limited the “range of variables” (p. 346). Likewise, Esbensen and Deschenes (1998) found no relationship indicating that social disorganization and poverty are correlated with gang membership, but failed to include the necessary measures to investigate these specific factors. Regardless, they conclude that social structures are not the exclusive cause for gang membership, though they may have some relationship to it.

In reviewing the extant literature regarding macro-level socio-economic and cultural influences on gang affiliation, it is apparent that issues such as immigration, combined with de-industrialization, and subsequent social and economic exclusion and isolation are responsible for creating an environment suitable for informal social and economic networks to arise, specifically within Latino/Chicano communities (see for example, Moore, 1991; Vigil, 1988). While gang-affiliated individuals from different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds may engage in different traditions and practices, (individually and as a group), research indicates that certain macro-level factors are responsible for influencing gang affiliation across ethnicity and across geographic boundaries (Hagedorn, 2008). In his investigation of gangs throughout the world, Hagedorn argues that *“gangs are shaped by racial and ethnic oppression, as well as poverty and slums, and are reactions of despair to persisting inequality”* (italics in original, p. xxiv). However, the issue of gang membership and, specifically, identity formation among gang-affiliated individuals extends beyond macro-level, socio-structural constraints. Thus, in order to gain a more holistic understanding of these issues, it is important to continue to examine the connection between these structural problems and

other factors such as middle-level socio-cultural and educational influences, as well as any micro-level, individually-situated behaviours.

School and Family

While evidence shows that structural factors do play an important role in gang formation and the changing nature of gangs, these are certainly not the only factors that contribute to these phenomena (Esbensen & Deschenes, 1998). Both qualitative and quantitative research indicates that there may be a link between “low expectations for completing school,” poor educational achievement and gang membership (Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Dietrich, 1998; Esbensen & Deschenes, 1998; Vigil, 1988; 2007). In order to evaluate the unique experiences of Chicana/os and their relationship to school, it is important to understand the nature of the American educational system and how it is not necessarily set up to encourage achievement for students of colour, specifically Chicana/os.

There has been a wealth of academic information in recent years regarding Latina/o and Chicana/o students and their relationships to the public educational system (Dietrich, 1998; Elenes, 1997; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Educational scholars have long been critical of the current structure of public education and the curriculum, which has failed to include relevant historical and political information to students of colour about their cultures (see, for example, Giroux, 1997). Elenes (1997) argues that the “dominant educational practices in the United States promote the assimilation of Chicanas/os (and other minorities) into the dominant culture, especially to its myths of equality, democracy, freedom, and individualism” (p. 360). These practices may, in fact, clash with traditional Chicana/o and Latina/o beliefs and practices which tend to emphasize the importance of *familismo* (adhering to family-based values) and success as being collective, or community-based, and not necessarily individually-based (Ayón & Aisenberg, 2010). Some of these traditional American practices have proven harmful to students of colour because they are made aware of traditional “American values” and taught about the egalitarian nature of these values—that if they work hard enough, they too can achieve the “American dream”—but quickly learn through their own experiences that these values do not apply to them, their families, or their communities. The

transmission of these ideas is, as Elenes (1997) argues, “detrimental to the educational advancement” (p. 360) of minority students because these students are being deceived by teachers, counselors, and policy makers, all of whom are responsible for reproducing traditional white, middle class values and encouraging students to believe that these values apply to them as well.

In her ethnography about Latina adolescents in Southern California, Lisa Dietrich (1998) observes that “education has also been criticized as a tool by which powerful interest groups selectively transmit skills in order to reproduce the class, gender, and ethnic inequities of the wider social structure” (p. 78).⁷ Specific epistemologies, values, and ideas are transmitted to students of various racial and ethnic backgrounds often by white, middle-class teachers. School then becomes a medium that works to reproduce a patriarchal pedagogy reflective of dominant cultural values. This pedagogical and epistemological system does not represent—and ultimately denies—young Latina students a meaningful ontology. When school denies certain groups of people an understanding of their own, culturally-relevant history, it transmits the idea that certain peoples’ unique histories do not matter. Policies that force teachers to “teach to the test,” or to teach children what they need to know to pass a standardized exam in order to graduate, ignore the importance of teaching people about who they are as well as deny white students the opportunity to gain knowledge about other cultures. These academic policies often fail to acknowledge that students, and particularly minorities, have different cultural, racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds and encourage the transmission of white, middle-class values.

The problem with the transmission of white, middle-class values is that not everyone shares those values. The concept of the American meritocratic system was developed and is perpetuated by American institutions, particularly the schools, because American economic interests are at stake. The idea that all individuals are able to pursue and eventually realize their dreams is rooted in the myth that everyone in the United States is given an equal foundation from which they can build their futures.

⁷ For a broader description of this process, see Bowles & Gintis' (1976) groundbreaking work, *Schooling in Capitalist America*.

Individuals residing in economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the United States are often confronted with numerous social disadvantages. “A number of social problems tend to come bundled together at the neighbourhood level, including...crime, adolescent delinquency, social and physical disorder...school dropout, and child maltreatment” (Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002, p. 446). When faced with myriad challenges occurring at the macro-level, and impacting individuals at the meso and micro-levels, the American meritocracy is, by and large, little more than a myth for many individuals who are not part of dominant culture, created by the middle-class to serve and protect middle-class interests at a very basic level. Even during the Progressive Era when great reforms were taking place in the social and political spheres, these reforms were designed to combat the overwhelming economic influence of the elites in American society and restore power to the middle class (Reese, 2002). Public education was designed to achieve this goal. And now schools, as a result of the demand by middle class citizens, afraid of losing even more of their power in a society threatened by changing demographics, are being held accountable for transmitting certain ideologies not only through pedagogy but also through its institutional structure. The way the educational system is constructed necessarily sets certain students up for failure because they are taught to embrace dominant values, such as the notion that all individuals have equal opportunities and that education provides the path to success; however, while this may be true for some individuals, one may not generalize these concepts to the population as a whole, especially those who suffer from generational poverty as well as those come from non-white backgrounds. One potential way of addressing this issue is to incorporate a more inclusive curriculum, one that addresses the histories, geographies, available resources, and social concerns of students from various cultures.

In addition to the problem of pedagogy, there also exists the issue of schools failing to create meaningful, intellectually stimulating and structured environments for students, particularly those students who live in poor, urban areas. Schools in poor, inner-city neighbourhoods have been described by teachers, students, and academics as “dumping grounds” (Dietrich, 1998; Garot, 2010). This term is powerful not only because it denotes a character judgment of the students who are being “dumped,” but also because it is raced, classed, and gendered in nature. That is, it is used to describe

poor, minority students. Specifically, students who are seen as being “problematic” and unable to conform to conventional academic norms are simply passed from grade to grade without any consideration of academic aptitude (Dietrich, 1998). The result is a group of economically deprived students who have inadequate reading, writing, and analytic abilities. Having a limited, academic aptitude limits these individuals’ ability to find and sustain gainful employment, and this perpetuates socio-economic instability.

Often, schools serving inner-city, African-American and Latino/a children are plagued with issues such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate or nonexistent materials for students such as text books, and a lack of teacher attention towards or advocacy on behalf of students, particularly those who have fallen behind. In fairness to teachers, however, they are often so overburdened due to the number of students in their classrooms that it is impossible for them to focus on individual students’ needs or provide them with supportive assistance. As a former social worker who worked with Latino communities in various low-income neighbourhoods in Los Angeles, I witnessed firsthand what inner-city children experienced when they entered the public school system. I often had to visit my clients’ schools in order to work with teachers and principals to ensure students’ attendance, be involved in their Individualized Treatment Planning (IEP), and discourage expulsion. The parents of my clients rarely came to school to advocate on behalf of their children, and when they did, language barriers impeded their efforts. These impediments only added to the educational difficulties that these students encountered within the public school system.

Non-immigrant (2nd and 3rd generation) Latina students respond to the raced, classed, and gendered educational system through resistance (Dietrich, 1998). According to Dietrich (1998), these young women seek to preserve their language and culture by subtly subverting hegemonic norms that support and maintain the current pedagogy. She found that:

Many of the Latino students told [her] that they found it ‘hard to relate’ to the counselors and teachers.’ The general lack of Chicana role models at the school is problematic since many of the girls...found little in school with which they could identify (p. 84).

The desire to preserve culturally relevant aspects of their identity, combined with schools' reproduction of white, middle-class, patriarchal pedagogy leads these young women to resist the curriculum and the system at large. The link between the failure of American pedagogy and the educational system and the proliferation of gangs is two-fold. First, the pyramidal/hierarchical structure of gangs, which is arguably a ghettoized reproduction of the American class system (Campbell, 1987), is something adolescents learn to re-create through the American values that have been transmitted to them in school. Second, peer influence and the creation of a group identity by Latinos/as and other minority groups are a result of feelings of rejection by the dominant society.

American pedagogy transmits white, middle-class, patriarchal, hegemonic beliefs and values such as the meritocratic system and egalitarianism, which are then transmitted to students through the prescribed curriculum. These values are relevant to white, middle-class culture but are not necessarily relevant to individuals from other socio-economic or ethnic backgrounds. When these values are transmitted to individuals who have different values and beliefs, they tend to be embraced because they are expected to be embraced, but the great majority of poor, minority students soon realize that what is subtly being taught is unattainable. The problem here lays in the disparity between what is expected and what is possible. Minority students are expected to embrace the same dominant cultural values as middle and upper middle class students, but do not have the same resources or access to resources, specifically educational resources, which their more affluent counterparts possess.

In addition to these factors, peer influence has been shown to exert a strong influence on how these young women choose to subvert their own rejection by the system (Kolb, 2001; Willis, 1977). Numerous studies cite the importance of peer influence on delinquent or subversive actions and behaviours (Dietrich, 1998; Kolb, 2001; Willis, 1977). One way in which students create structure and meaning is through the reproduction of street norms within the school. The creation of gangs or cliques is one way in which the students try to create their own sense of structure to help them make sense of their lives and subsequently shape their identities.

Equally important to our understanding of Chicana/os relationship with schooling are parents' attitudes towards and expectations of it. Increasingly, children residing in the barrios come from single-parent homes headed primarily by mothers. They often reside in overcrowded homes and face tremendous psychological strain resulting from family problems and "exacerbated by social forces" (Vigil, 1988, p. 25). These children disproportionately come from troubled families with poor parental supervision. In addition, immigrant parents – who have higher rates of illiteracy than non-immigrant parents – may feel alienated from the educational system because they are unable to help their children attain academic success and may need their children to work, in addition to attending school, in order to generate additional income for the household or for their children to step into the role of parenting younger siblings. Overloading youth with financial and parental responsibilities impedes their ability to focus on school and to keep up with the curriculum.

In addition, many children who reside in the barrio come from single-parent families and overcrowded homes where school attendance and educational achievement takes a back seat to helping out in the home. Children who come from these often chaotic environments do not have parental supervision in order to ensure that they attend school or complete school work. Education takes a back seat to maintaining some semblance of cohesion within the family. This disparity between what is expected of children and their actual circumstances is a direct reflection of macro-level, systemic inequalities that exclude certain individuals from the work force and socially isolate them. In effect, American institutions work to reinforce traditional, dominant (often white), hegemonic social and economic interests. However, discussion of macro and meso-level inequalities is not enough to help explain why some individuals, specifically women of colour, become involved in informal networks such as gangs while some do not. In order to gain a more complete understanding of this phenomenon, one must account for individually-situated behaviours.

Individual

There is no doubt that issues such as immigration, poverty, and limited resources cause family strain which, in turn, creates psychological strain for the children of these

families (Moore, 1991; Vigil, 1988). While Moore's (1991) data do not support the idea that poverty and immigration cause gang membership, she argues that poverty and immigration do directly impact the "emotional climate of the family during childhood that problems begin to be evident" (p. 89). Family stress may, in part, facilitate individually situated problems such as childhood physical and sexual abuse, running away, drug use, and risky sexual behaviour, all of which are common among gang-affiliated girls (Moore, 1991; Valdez, 2007). Additionally, some have argued that the gang becomes a safe-haven, or surrogate family, for some women where they believe that they can escape the abuse and chaos in their homes and seek protection (Caldwell, 2010; Hunt, Mackenzie, & Joe-Laidler, 2000; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Miller, 2001). Ironically, women running from abusive homes to the streets are frequently exposed to further violence and victimization by their fellow gang members and others (Miller, 2001).

One issue found to be related to gang membership was the presence of low family involvement and serious family problems (Miller, 2001; Moore, 1991; Portillos, 1999; Thornberry, 1998; Valdez, 2007; Vigil, 1988). These issues have been the source of debate among some gang scholars. Some quantitative studies show that there is no relationship between parental attachment (which is fostered through parent-child bonding, specifically through parental response to the child's emotional and physical needs)⁸ and gang membership (see Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993). Others, however, such as Esbensen and Deschenes (1998), found that gang members are less attached to primary caregivers than non-gang members, but did not find any significant differences between gender in level of attachment. Thus, it remains unclear whether gang-affiliated females are more or less attached to their primary caregivers than their male counterparts. Qualitative studies, on the other hand, are more apt to suggest the existence of a strong link between gang membership for girls and family problems (Miller, 2001, 2002c), implicated in which are issues related to attachment with the primary caregiver(s).

⁸ For a more complete discussion on the role and importance of parent-child attachment during the early, formative years, see Bowlby (1969, 1973, and 1980). In addition, see Erickson, Sroufe, & Egeland (1985) for a discussion of the relationship between attachment and childhood behavioural problems.

Miller (2001) found that girls involved in gangs were significantly more likely than non-members to come from abusive homes characterized by physical and sexual violence. Likewise, Moore (1991) found that girl gang members were more likely than boys to have had sexual advances made towards them in their home. In a study conducted in two barrios in East Los Angeles, Moore found that twenty-nine percent of girls reported experiencing a sexual advance; however, she suggested that this is likely an underestimation because a large number of participants “hesitated” before reporting that they had not been the victim of sexual advances in their homes. A history of sexual abuse was more commonly found among older female gang members (or, rather, the women involved in “older cliques”) who came from more traditional families. She speculated that this was largely the result of men’s adherence to Mexican traditionalism and the patriarchal beliefs that ensue. Although her data clearly showed girl gang members reported more sexual abuse than boys, Moore stated it remained unclear whether there was a direct link between sexual abuse and gang membership. Similarly, Portillos (1999) found that a significant percentage of gang-affiliated Chicanas and Latinas in his study (69%) had been victims of physical or sexual abuse. Like Moore (1991), Portillos (1999) suggested that patriarchal norms specific to Mexican culture were often at play with respect to sexual abuse within these traditional Mexican families. Gender performance within the barrio, he further suggested, was constructed differently for females and males because females were taught to adhere to certain sexual standards such as *marianismo*.⁹ Their experiences with abuse, he argued, facilitated their construction and performance of a specific type of gang identity (“oppositional femininity”) in which these young women are more likely to become involved in substance abuse, promiscuous behaviour, and spending time in the streets with homeboys.

Research has consistently shown that victims of physical and sexual abuse are more likely to engage in substance abuse (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Rohsenow, Corbett, & Devine, 1988; Singer, Petchers, & Hussey, 1989). In addition, research has

⁹ The term *marianismo* describes the qualities of “traditional” femininity which are reciprocal of those of machismo in men (Campbell, 1987).” These qualities revolve around passivity, virginity, and meeting the needs of one’s husband and family.

shown that there is a link between childhood abuse, substance abuse, and gang membership, though the exact pathway remains unclear (see Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Miller, 2001; Moore, 1991). Often, girls are drawn to the streets in order to escape their abusive and chaotic home lives. They find solace in the idea that their homies will provide them with protection, and they simultaneously find temporary comfort in substance use, as it provides them with a means for coping with their trauma. Ironically, engaging in substance abuse and seeking out relationships on the streets with the gangs places these women at higher risk for victimization (Miller, 2001). Moore (1991) has provided a detailed account of the role of drugs in the gang lifestyle and has described how the gang lifestyle typically heavily revolved around “hanging out” and “partying,” which refers to spending time together drinking and using drugs. Campbell’s (1987) findings show that female gang members constructed a social acceptance around consuming certain types of illicit drugs on occasion (such as LSD and amphetamines).

Gang affiliated girls and women similarly tended to establish norms surrounding sex and sexuality for themselves and other women through their gang affiliation. Valdez (2007) found that gang-affiliated girls from low-income, predominantly Mexican neighbourhoods were more at risk for being sexually victimized than other girls. He also found that Chicana gang members engaged in sexual activities at a younger age, had earlier onset of pregnancy, and had more sexual partners than non-members (Valdez, 2007). While many researchers tended to sexualize girls in gangs and ultimately constructed them as being “sexual chattel,” feminist scholars have argued that women are more than auxiliary gang members whose sole purpose is to provide sexual favours and that sexual promiscuity was considered taboo by female gang members (Campbell, 1987; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Miller, 2001; Moore & Hagedorn, 1996; Portillos, 1999; Schalet, Hunt & Joe-Laidler, 2003). For example, despite the fact that Latino culture has traditionally emphasized the importance of maintaining one’s virginity until marriage, these women, who often found themselves at odds with their two cultures, constructed an “acceptable” middle-ground when it came to sex. While being a ho (or, whore) was looked down upon, being sexually active at a young age was acceptable, but only if the young woman remained in a monogamous relationship or had a series of monogamous relationships.

Running away, or simply leaving home, has been referenced as being commonplace among female gang members. Giordano (1978) and Moore (1991) each found that over three quarters of the girls in their studies ran away from home at least once. Girls were more likely than boys to run away from home, possibly because of the restrictions placed on them in the home, and/or because they are more likely to be sexually victimized within the home than their male counterparts. Joe and Chesney-Lind (1995) argued that staying away from home for short periods of time was – for the girls in their sample – akin to running away. This behaviour was seen by their family members as being a gender violation. In their study of 72 female gang members, Hagedorn and Devitt (1999) found over one quarter of the girls ran away from home. Miller (2001) suggested that girls in her study began to spend more time away from their homes because of the presence of multiple family problems.

Many qualitative studies show that women look to the streets and the gang for protection; associating or affiliating with the gang has been cited as fostering a family feeling and facilitating a sense of belonging (Campbell, 1990; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Hunt, MacKenzie, & Joe-Laidler, 2000; Miller, 2001). While Esbensen and Huizinga (1993) did not find evidence for the gang acting as a surrogate family for affiliated females, qualitative studies show that the gang provides a sense of safety and security for some girls who have experienced violence in their homes (Campbell, 1990; Campbell, 1995; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Hunt, MacKenzie, & Joe-Laidler, 2000; Miller, 2001). Joe and Chesney-Lind (1995) suggest that the gang acts as a surrogate family for both males and females. However, identification with the gang as family becomes even more important for members who report a history of abuse within their homes. Caldwell (2010) argues that gangs provide young women an escape from abuse, serve to protect them, and offer a means for generating income. While Miller (2001) does not definitively state that the gang acts as a surrogate family for female members, she does describe that the girls in her study reportedly believed that the gang would fulfill this role when they became gang-affiliated.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Over the past few decades, postmodern feminist theorists have made an attempt to move away from the meta-narrative¹⁰ and have begun to reject some of the core theoretical assumptions of traditional feminist thought which have essentialized and de-historicized women's experiences and gendered relations (Maharaj, 1995). Traditional feminist theorists have largely rejected postmodern ideology because, they have argued, rejection of meta-narrative calls for an abandonment of theory altogether. However, arguing about the a-theoretical nature of postmodernism not only discounts the complexities of the interrelatedness of structures involved in gendered relations but also requires a totalization of gendered experiences. In other words, postmodern feminist thought requires us to think beyond a simplistic general theory that explains differential power relations and to acknowledge how structures interact and give way to larger socio-political systems. This way of theorizing takes into account the heterogeneity of women's experiences and places them within a historical and non-essentialist framework. In order to fully understand and appreciate the nature of postmodern theory and the ways in which it helps explain constructions of gender, it is important to acknowledge that social structures are socially and historically composed and infused with power (Majaraj, 1995).

In his seminal work, Connell (1987) draws upon structuralist, feminist, and postmodern models in order to create a working theory that allows us to understand the complexities of gender, sexuality, and gendered relations within a historical context. Connell's (1987) work focuses on the interplay of various structures that shape and are subsequently shaped by individuals. A structure, he argues, is a pattern that constrains the actions of those residing within it. Structures, then, are objects of practice. Labour, for example, is a structure which works to shape (though constraint) gendered relations. In his work, Connell incorporates Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus in which he links theory with praxis. However, he argues that Bourdieu's work implies that practice is

¹⁰ In postmodernism, meta-narrative refers to an ideology that attempts to explain all facets of society and the experiences of individuals.

socially reproduced and is thus not dynamic. Practice is, according to Bourdieu, “something that happens behind the backs of actors” (Connell, 1987, p. 94).

According to Connell (1987), Giddens' (1984) structuration theory comes closest to a working theory that helps explain gendered relations. Connell, like Giddens, argues that human action occurs within the confines of social structures, which are defined by external rules, norms, and laws. These seemingly rigid structures, however, are malleable and can be re-shaped by human action. For instance, Giddens links structure with human agency and suggests that gender itself constitutes a social structure. While performance of gender may vary among individuals, gender is nonetheless performed within the confines of social and cultural rules and expectations. Giddens argues that through agency it is possible for individuals to change various facets of gender; however, the underlying gendered social structure still exists. For example, gender as a social structure influences the way humans perform gender in time, space, and place, which simultaneously works to redefine the gendered nature of the social structure itself. In other words, human action and social structure(s) are not independent of one another, but rather are mutually constitutive.

It is necessary to recognize that the agency of the individual cannot reasonably be isolated and said to exist in any one social structure at any given time. Rather, at any given time the individual exists in multiple social structures that simultaneously exert force upon her/him and which the individual unconsciously reshapes. Where Connell differs from Giddens is in his argument that “practice can be turned against what constrains it; so structure can be deliberately the object of practice” (Connell, 1987, p. 95). In other words, action is reflexive and has the power to change structure, though it can never escape structure itself. We must, then, “pay attention both to how structure shapes individual choice and social interaction and to how human agency creates, sustains, and modifies current structure” (Risman, 2009, p. 433). History, Connell argues, is susceptible to major change through transformative political movements. Since there is the possibility for practice to move beyond the constraints of the system that constrains it and, indeed, to transform it, a model of gendered relations must account for, and be rooted in, a historical context. For example, Connell (1987) argues that only by acknowledging how one structure—such as patriarchy—constrains

women's practice and closes off space for women, can women actually subvert the structure itself and transform it. In other words, it leaves no room for agency or structural transformation, which would deny the possibility for change. Instead of looking at the role of individual structures that constrain practice, we must account for a multiplicity of structures and how they are interwoven. They must be considered interdependent. In order to do this, Connell continues to develop his model of gendered relations within a socio-historical context by expounding upon and linking three structural models: labour, power, and cathexis.

Labour

Connell's (1987) recognition of the structure of (and the division of) labour differs from traditional Marxist feminists who only focused on class relations under capitalism as the source of oppression for women. Women's oppression and the sexual division of labour, he argues, occurred prior to capitalism, and continues to occur in some nation-states even after those nations adopt a capitalist economy. Oppression of women and the division of labour, then, are intrinsically linked and oppression is not simply a product of this division. Gender relations are not just a product of capitalism, but a "feature of production itself" (p. 103). That is, gender relations are embedded within the mode of production. Through differential skill training for men and women, unpaid (and often unacknowledged) labour within the household for women, and unequal wages between the sexes, it is apparent that there exists a gendered division of labour which operates as a constraint on practice for women. Connell argues that the division of labour becomes even more apparent when nation-states need to create and enforce anti-discrimination laws and affirmative action in order to ensure that women are, in fact, considered for positions and skill training which typically accommodate men.

Power

The next structural feature of gendered order and practice is power (Connell, 1987). This structure has to do with "authority, control and coercion in relation to gender" and is linked with an inequality in resources (and access to resources) which creates an imbalance whereby some groups are favoured over others (Maharaj, 1995, p. 60). In

addition, power is linked with culture. Power is determined both in and through culture. Connell uses an example of the Catholic Church and how those who adhere to Church practices are responsible for policing women's sexuality in order to ensure their virginity. Controlling women's sexuality and demanding their obedience are the ways in which the Church and those who buy into ecclesiastical authority participate in and sustain power. That power is necessarily gendered. Connell suggests that, while Western households are still arranged according to a hierarchy, the hierarchy is not as patriarchal now as it was in previous decades. The reason for this has to do with negotiations which are now made between men and women within the household and not simply a shift in ideology. In fact, Connell argues that in most of the world there still exists a patriarchal hierarchy within the home; however, the possibility clearly exists that individuals are able to transform social structures through subversive practice.

Cathexis

The third structure that Connell (1987) discusses is that of cathexis, or that which constrains and governs sexuality. Connell states that "the structure that organizes [human] attachments [to one another] I will call cathexis" (p. 112). In order to conceptualize this social structure it is imperative that we understand sexuality as a social construct. That is, sexuality does not and cannot exist outside of social practices; to assume it does is to reify the construct. Sexual desire is one construct that is regulated by the cathetic structure. For example, desire is often dichotomized in capitalist countries based on the masculine and the feminine or based on heterosexual or homosexual experiences. Individuals tend to participate in highly gendered, sexualized, and dichotomized experiences because women are often sexualized differently than men. For example, despite the light being shined on women's sexual liberation, there continues to be a propensity towards policing women's sexuality (i.e., women should be monogamous, or should limit their number of sexual partners). The use of pejorative, sexually-explicit terms such as "slut" and "whore" to define women and their sexuality has even spawned movements such as the "Slut Walk" that takes place across the United States to encourage women to reclaim the terms used to constrain their sexuality. Connell's examination of the cathetic structure reveals the power differentials inherent in the expression of sexuality as men are allowed more sexual

freedom than women and are neither condemned nor belittled for expressing their sexuality in a way that is meaningful to them. The fact that these differences in permissible sexual expression arose and continue to persist indicates the existence of a power imbalance. Cathexis, then, imposes limits on and thus constrains sexuality and social desire. Laws, such as those addressing the age of consent and that regulate the legality of gay marriage are also examples of cathetic constraints. Regulation of social desire, then, is necessarily linked with power. That is, certain groups have advantages over others and are in a position of power to create definitions and conditions which act to constrain those who lack it.

In this sense, we can also begin to understand how these social structures are inextricably intertwined. Labour and cathexis are imbued with power but are simultaneously responsible for the shape of the structure of authority and control or power. These structures are constantly under construction by the individuals who reside within them. All individuals reside within these structures and are simultaneously shaping and being shaped by them, an idea commonly referred to as “constrained agency.”¹¹ Using Connell’s (1987) model, then, helps create a working theory for understanding human action and the politics of structural transformation. We see how individuals – despite their constraints – can participate from within the confines of these social structures and transform them.

Risman (2004) argues that gender should be treated as another social structure because it is responsible for shaping, constraining, and patterning human behaviours. She rejects traditional structuralist theories which argue that social structures operate outside of individuals. Like Connell (1987) and Giddens (1984), Risman asserts that individuals operate within the confines of social structures and those social structures, in turn, are malleable through human action. Dichotomization of gendered differences and the constraints placed on women are based on sex.¹² That is, individuals develop

¹¹ This argument refers to the idea that individuals reside within the constraints of social structures (such as race, class, gender, and cathexis, for example), but are also active agents whose behavioural and discursive performances are simultaneously responsible for (re)shaping structures and thus the ways in which these structures constrain those who reside within. I will illustrate this idea further in chapters three, four, and five through the use of empirical findings.

¹² For further discussion on the social construction of sex and gender, see Butler (1990).

schemas and learn how to perform gendered behaviour. Gendered behaviour, then, is the result of individuals' belief that there are inherent differences between men and women because of sex. As a result, the social structure (gender) is not acknowledged by individuals as oppressive because men and women understand their (sexed) experiences as inherently different in the first place. Risman (2009) points out that traditional structural theory suggests men and women "experience identical structural conditions and role expectations" and that differences simply exist in sexual anatomy (p. 432). The major flaw with this argument, she states, is that if men and women do, in fact, exist and operate within the same structural confines and conditions, the very structure in which they reside (gender) would disappear altogether.

Indeed, gender continues to exist, and this is apparent when we account for differential behavioural expectations and constraints placed upon women such as the policing of sexuality. Risman (2009) states that a traditional structural argument,

[I]gnores not only internalized gender at the individual level... but the cultural interactional expectations that remain attached to women and men because of their gender category. A structural perspective on gender is accurate only if we realize that gender itself is a structure deeply embedded in society. (p.432)

Gender is internalized by individuals early on and remains part of their cognitive schema. It is deeply embedded in their understanding of the order and organization of the world. However, these schemas through which individuals come to understand gender and gendered behaviour are rooted in the dichotomization of sexual anatomy. If individuals continue to understand gendered behaviour based purely on sexual differences, gendered expectations will remain unequal, and there will be no possibility for the disappearance of the gendered social structure. It is Risman's intention to identify the difference between when gendered behaviour is performed out of habit and when it is performed consciously. She questions whether we can refuse to do gender according to traditional expectations or whether "rebellion is simply doing gender differently, forging alternative masculinities and femininities" (p. 433).¹³ In other words, does performing

¹³ I will return to this query through the evaluation of an empirical example later in this dissertation.

gendered or sexualized behaviour that is outside of the realm of a practice we can actually identify and/or name a complete subversion of the gendered and sexualized structures that constrain us?¹⁴

Through the use of “power and privilege,” men are responsible for the reproduction of unequal gendered norms. For example, acting as the protector of women (who traditionally have been argued to be in need of protection), men construct women as “others” who are less capable of protecting themselves or being independent (Risman, 2004, p. 438). These behaviours are deeply rooted in cultural beliefs and expectations that men are more independent and more capable of playing the role of protector and provider. This does not mean that men are solely responsible for the reproduction of gendered behaviours, however. Women, too, have internalized these norms and tend to act accordingly. In this way, both men and women are often unconsciously responsible for the reproduction of gender roles and gendered behaviours. However, rebellion can and does change the social institutions that constrain gendered behaviour (Connell, 1987; Risman, 2004). In order to understand the manner in which this happens, one must acknowledge the important link between theory and praxis. Risman questions, “[P]erhaps the most important question a critical scholar must ask is, ‘What mechanisms are currently constructing inequality, and how can these be transformed to create a more just world’” (p. 445)? This question forces us to evaluate human agency, what it looks like and how it occurs within the confines of social structures. Once we are able to recognize these factors we can begin to understand how subversive practice takes shape and works to transform social structures.

The Matrix of Oppression and Constrained Agency

An analysis of social structures would not be complete without acknowledgement of the intersectional nature of identity and the roles played by identity markers other than

¹⁴ For a more thorough discussion on the deconstruction of performance of gender and sexuality and a closer evaluation of this query, see Butler (2004), Halberstam (1998), and Hale (1997).

gender, such as class and race (Collins, 1998; Risman, 2004).¹⁵ In her examination of the existence of raced, classed, and gendered hierarchies, Collins (1998) draws a parallel between ideals created and standards employed by families and nation-states. The hierarchies that exist within families, she argues, mirror those that exist within society at large. The nation-state lays the foundation for hierarchal ideals within its “family” at a macro level, which, in turn, influences familial patterns operating at a micro level. For example, society, like the family, socializes children to understand their raced, classed, and gendered position within society. Again, children are conditioned to view the world through a particular schema. Collins argues that race—being a social construct—matters less than people’s thoughts and beliefs about it. People are socialized to acknowledge and point out racial difference; however, buying into the idea of racial difference and attributing qualitative differences to individuals because of this difference simply reifies the social construct.

Collins (1998) also incorporates the idea of birth order in order to understand hierarchal differences. Just as birth order in families tends to determine the amount of “freedom” a family member will have (i.e., an older child may have more freedom than her/his younger siblings), citizenship also determines the amount of freedom one may possess. This means that white, heterosexual, European-Americans who have resided in the United States for decades or centuries, have more freedoms and are more entitled to benefits than immigrants or the children of immigrants. Here, Collins argues, is where violence has the potential to occur. Violence can be physical but can also be expressed through sanctions used to maintain unequal power relations. Violence is often exerted by those in power towards those with little or no power and, therefore those with little or no power fail to recognize their own oppression. For example, violence in the form of hate crimes is routinely overlooked by police (and may even be perpetuated by the police) and other criminal justice officials and is underreported by the media. Middle and upper middle-class whites do not recognize their own privileged status within American society and, therefore, question why minorities cannot pull themselves out of poverty.

¹⁵ While race, class and gender and three common identity markers discussed in feminist literature under the general term “intersectionality,” they do not represent an exhaustive list of other potential factors involved in the formation and performance of identity.

Underreporting of “family secrets,” is commonplace because of fear of retribution or sanctions.¹⁶

Home is supposed to be a safe space for individuals. Collins (1998) discusses the homogenous nature of neighbourhoods and the nation-state. She equates neighbourhoods to “mini nation-states” which are often racially differentiated. Those who retain power and privilege are responsible for creating and instituting policies that construct “in” groups and “out” groups. That is, through practices such as suburban zoning, middle and upper middle-class whites are effectively able to maintain “racial purity” within their neighbourhoods and restrict poor, marginalized individuals to low-income neighbourhoods with inferior resources and limited access to resources such as quality schools and gainful employment. Like meso-level segregation practices, so too, does the United States practice territoriality which thrives through the creation of in-groups and out-groups. By securing the national borders and using military force, the United States is able to protect its self-interest. Collins argues that “maintaining borders of all sorts becomes vitally important. Preserving the logic of segregated home spaces requires strict rules to distinguish insiders from outsiders. Unfortunately, far too often, “these boundaries continue to be drawn along the color line” (p. 69). The role of geographical isolation and segregation plays a significant role in the identity formation of Chicana/os, specifically the participants in this study. While the United States makes claims of one nationality – American – people are hierarchically categorized according to race and/or ethnicity which permits and perpetuates ethnic nationalism and has important implications for the study of identity politics. Through the work of Connell (1984), Collins (1998), and Risman (2004), it becomes apparent that individuals reside within the bounds of structures that confine and also shape human action. Human action, in turn, helps shape the structures which confine it. In addition, there is an

¹⁶ Using Collins’s (1998) parallel, I also would like to point out the relationship between citizenship and immigration, or, the idea of “second class” citizenship. For example, if the government (which is run by those in power) denies immigrants access to resources such as healthcare or quality education, those citizens who also retain power (primarily white, middle-class Americans) tend to overlook or even agree with discriminatory policies because they have been socialized to understand their position of power and privilege and the benefits come with residing in their rung of the hierarchy. In other words, because of their privileged position, they are unable to see or understand how they are involved in the creation and perpetuation of these exclusionary and oppressive conditions and practices.

undeniable interplay between structures, such that we are virtually unable to conceptualize where one begins and the other ends. Individuals are socialized from birth to view the world through a particular lens, or a particular set of lenses that reinforce gendered, raced, and classed norms and are perpetuated within the confines of these structures. Because these gendered, raced, and classed behaviours are constructed based upon the dichotomization of differences, such as man/woman, black/white, or poor/wealthy, society has created an unequal field from which human action may occur. Risman (2004) argues that “[t]here is no a priori reason why we should accept any other role differentiation simply based on biological sex category” (p. 446). When we do differentiate roles, we reify social constructs, create bias, and reinforce inequality and stratification as well as in-groups and out-groups.

Theory alone, however, is not sufficient to aid in our understanding of the very real, lived experiences of groups of people. If we are to build a true, practice-based theoretical framework that makes sense in terms of our structural understanding of gendered relations among gang-affiliated Chicanas, then it is important to acknowledge the interplay of structures in these women’s lives.

Chicanas and Structural Constraints

While I recognize I run the risk of essentializing an entire culture, it is generally recognized that Mexican culture tends to adhere to a patriarchal framework, one in which men are seen as the breadwinners and women are encouraged to remain homemakers and child-care providers (for example, Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Portillos, 1999).¹⁷ Women’s labour within the home – whether in Mexican culture or not – often goes unnoticed because women are not paid for the work they do. As such, women tend to be constrained by the structure of labour in the form of having to adhere to domesticity. When women—specifically Chicanas and Latinas—do push beyond the bounds of these constraints, they often find themselves in low-wage, service-sector jobs as they often have unequal access to labour (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007). While many

¹⁷ This is not a critique of patriarchal practices within the culture per se; however, it is an important factor to take into account for the purpose of this dissertation.

Mexican men are often constrained by the structure of labour as well because they do not have equal access to education and training, women are faced with a more constraining burden: that of having to labour within the home (unpaid labour) and outside of the home (sometimes for less than minimum wage) because single-parenting has increased.

However, it is not only Mexican immigrants who lack equal access to employment and experience constraints because they must also work within the home. Second generation Chicanas often find themselves in a similar situation due to unequal access to meaningful education and, therefore, unequal access to the labour market. In addition, these young women are often responsible for child-care within their own homes in order to help their parents. If wealth is intergenerational – passed down through the generations – then Latinas/Chicanas find themselves in a predicament whereby they are never provided a sturdy financial foundation from which to begin their lives. All of the factors discussed above culminate and, indeed constrain, these young women from moving forward and attaining financial independence.¹⁸

The final application of this structural model has to do with the cathetic structure or the structure of sexual desire. As previously discussed, women within traditional Mexican homes are often subject to *marianismo*, the belief that women should maintain their virginity until marriage. Since women are socialized to adhere to this principle, constraints are placed on their sexuality. Women are dichotomized as being either “good” (pure), or “bad” (promiscuous).¹⁹ Women then are simultaneously responsible for exerting control over other gang-affiliated women through the policing of sexuality (as will be discussed in detail in chapter 3) and degrading one another for being too feminine. The cognitive schema to which they are taught to adhere from an early age is intrinsically linked with both history and culture. Power also runs through this structure,

¹⁸ Interestingly, these women may, simultaneously, push against these constraints by working outside of the traditional job market. That is, they may (and do) use other methods for earning money and attempting to create financial stability in order to survive. “Robbing people” and selling drugs are two means by which women involved in gangs may push against the structural bounds which constrain them and seemly inhibit their socioeconomic mobility.

¹⁹ The dichotomization of female sexuality is certainly not unique to Mexican culture, but is present within it and thus worth discussing.

specifically through discursive practice. Language can – and often is – used to reinforce power relationships. That is, women employ discursive practices to signify who is part of the “in” group (i.e., who is a “good” girl), and who is not. Therefore, those who have the power to designate the “good” from the “bad” legitimate their claims by labeling and thus subjugating the “other.”

Girls, Gangs, and Identity

Questions about changes in the nature of female gangs have yielded responses that have traditionally dichotomized female gang members as liberated feminists who are trying to keep up with their male counterparts, or as passive, vulnerable girls who lack agency and the ability to make their own decisions (Batchelor, 2009). “Sex objects or ‘tomboys’ – these are the images that, until recently, dominated the literature on female gang members” (Moore & Hagedorn, 2001, p. 2). In addition, dichotomizing gang-affiliated girls in this manner, some gang scholars have employed gender-neutral explanations which fail to take into account the role of gender in these women’s lives (Miller, 2001).

The “liberation hypothesis,” for example, suggests that women’s changing roles in the labour market – largely influenced by the second wave of feminism – not only liberated them but drove them to take on masculine characteristics, engage in masculine behaviour, and subsequently participate in “male” crimes (Adler, 1975). This theory is problematic because those who subscribe to it ignore the role of gender. This theory of increased female involvement in gangs has been largely discredited due to a lack of evidence (Miller, 2001). On the other hand, some scholars have suggested that female gang members amount to little more than sexual possessions of their male counterparts (Batchelor, 2009; Joe & Chesney- Lind, 1995; Joe-Laidler & Hunt, 2001a). For example, traditional accounts of gang membership have primarily focused on the experiences of males and reinforced stereotypes of female members as auxiliary members and sexual possessions (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Cohen, 1955; W. Miller, 1958; Thrasher, 1927). More recently, Sanchez-Jankowski (1991) suggested that the female role in the gang was basically to serve the male members and, specifically, to address their sexual needs. Batchelor (2009), however, argued that many accounts of girls’ roles as sexual

pawns within the gang came from anecdotal evidence. While sexual exploitation is a very real concern for women involved in gangs, describing and defining these young women as simply sexual beings whose roles are to meet males' needs, denies them a sense of agency and precludes the fact that some young women do, in fact, reject the notion of sexual identities imposed upon them by others (Miller, 2001).

Finally, there has been a tendency to employ gender-neutral theories in order to explain the propensity for women to join gangs and engage in gang activity. However, these theories have done little to help explain the propensity for young, women of colour to join and remain affiliated with gangs and fail to take into account their multiple marginalities (Vigil, 1988) in addition to the implications of these oppressive experiences. This is not to suggest that women in gangs do not experience strain or cultural conflict but rather to suggest that no one or two factors account for gang affiliation, gang behaviour, or the collective and individual identity that is constructed as a result of gang affiliation.

While some traditional theories have indeed helped expand our knowledge of gangs and gang affiliation – through, for example, longitudinal-based studies (see, Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003) – gender-neutral theory has not been sufficient to explain this phenomenon. Gender-neutral theory suggests that certain characteristics are linked to criminogenic behaviour, and these characteristics can be equally attributed to men and women. Miller (2001) illustrates that women involved in gangs tend to have different life experiences than their male counterparts, such as higher incidences of physical and sexual abuse during childhood, lower levels of attachment with primary caregivers, and higher incidences of parental substance abuse. Gang affiliated women also tend to have different roles in the gang as opposed to their male counterparts (Miller, 2001). Because gang-affiliated women's experiences vary so much from the experiences of gang-affiliated men, it is futile to try to explain these experiences using gender-neutral theory.

Recently, however, we have moved towards more nuanced explanations of female gang membership. Despite previous dichotomization of women's experiences, Curry (1998) and Miller (2001) underscore the importance of understanding women's

gang-affiliation from a dialectical perspective, one which simultaneously acknowledges the social rewards while recognizing the damage and potential injury that can come from affiliation. However, a theoretical understanding of a woman's gang-affiliation from a dialectical perspective is also needed to understand how the imposition of social constraints impact these women and how they, in turn, both accept and resist these constraints. By better understanding women and their identities as gang members, it is possible to consider a dialectical perspective that acknowledges how these identities are both imposed upon a woman as a result of marginalization and also created by them. This imposition of and active construction by women of their own identities as gang members, therefore, makes it imperative that we attempt to understand how these women acquire and develop a sense of agency or self-determination. To begin to understand how female gang members do acquire and exert agency in their lives, it is important to understand the role of identity markers such as race, class and gender and how these markers converge and are performed within the context of the streets and social interactions within the gang.

Feminist-based scholarship on female gang membership offers us a unique look at distinct issues faced by female gang members and the different roles performed by them (see, for example, Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Joe-Laidler & Hunt, 2001; Messerschmidt, 2002; Miller, 2001, 2002a; Portillos, 1999). In order to understand the complex role of gender for gang-affiliated women, it is important to acknowledge the idea of gender as a performative act (Butler, 1990). That is, gender is a social construct that is performed by humans, who take on the role of social actors (Butler, 1990; Goffman, 1959). This idea—referred to in sociological circles as performativity—sets the stage, so to speak, for understanding the way in which individuals are, in part, responsible for creating their own identities and are targets for identity (or identities) imposed upon them. Many feminist and other critical scholars accept that identities are fluid and malleable (see, Butler, 1990; Risman, 2004, 2009). In other words, people perform gendered, raced, classed, and sexualized behaviours within different time frames, in different spaces, and through various social interactions. In Goffman's (1959) terms, people play to their audience(s). That does not, however, preclude the fact that these identity markers are constructed and reinforced by social actors in such a way that they become inculcated. Gender, for example, is one identity marker that has been heavily

shaped by a patriarchal belief system that has become institutionalized and is reflected in our daily interactions with one another and with larger systems, such as the criminal justice system.

Some researchers suggest that female gang members create an oppositional femininity appropriate within the gang context (see Messerschmidt, 2002; Portillos, 1999). For example, Portillos argues Chicanas are expected to conform to certain gendered expectations and roles within the home. Some girls, however, reject these expectations and move toward the gang wherein traditional, gendered behaviour is less of an expectation. The gang, in this case, offers women an outlet in which they are able to attain a sense of power and control, to a certain degree, over their lives and subsequently allows them to construct a new type of femininity. Despite this, Portillos (1999) is careful to note that while the gang offers women an arena in which to construct an oppositional femininity, "it cannot be described as a site of gender equality. Rather it simultaneously liberates and oppresses women" (p. 239). Female member's self-control is frequently challenged by their male counterparts in order to ensure that they fulfill their responsibility to restrain their sexuality. These women may move toward the gang as an outlet to escape abusive homes, which often punish them for stepping outside the bounds of traditional femininity, but the gang may also punish them for stepping outside the bounds of expected femininity within the gang.

In their study on the construction of femininity among girls in gangs, Joe-Laidler & Hunt (2001b) discuss the fluid nature of femininity and how it changes for and among gang affiliated women depending upon their "situational context." They show how femininity is constructed and constantly renegotiated by female gang members through their interactions with others. On one hand, these women are expected to maintain traditional gendered expectations such as "acting like a woman." They are expected by their families to cook, clean, and help care for the children. Similarly, they are expected by their homeboys to behave in a "respectable" manner by controlling their sexuality, which is simultaneously policed by the homeboys and homegirls. In addition, these women are responsible for policing other female gang members' sexuality, and look down on girls who are not seen as "respectable" (Campbell, 1990; Miller, 2001; Portillos, 1999). On the other hand, these women join gangs, in part, to escape traditional

patriarchal norms imposed on them within the home. They look for, and may find, that they are able to attain a greater sense of autonomy within the context of the gang. For female gang members, the manner by which they negotiate these paradoxical expectations and beliefs about femininity, or being a “good” girl, is to maintain “respectable” behaviour, meaning they actively negotiate and even regulate their behaviour based upon the social context and among their social interactions.

Messerschmidt (1997) argues that the social sciences and criminology in particular, tend to punish women for “stepping beyond the bounds of emphasized femininity” (p. 119). Women have been pathologized by the media, by academics, and by society at large, because they are moving away from traditional notions about what constitutes feminine behaviour. Women who are involved in gangs are frequently chastised for rejecting their femininity and engaging in masculine behaviours such as fighting and being involved in illegal enterprises. Messerschmidt (1995) suggests that young women in gangs create their own specific and unique femininity—‘bad-girl femininity’—whereby they seek to negotiate “how to fit into the unequal gendered structural arrangements of the gang by making use of norms and other resources at hand (2002, p. 464).” In other words, these young women are engaged in the creation of their own unique and culturally relevant form of femininity which, Messerschmidt argues, is consistent with third-wave feminism, i.e., feminism that has supported women’s efforts to be strong and independent as well as traditionally “feminine.” Messerschmidt’s (2002) contention is that third-wave feminism stems from girls wanting to be ‘bad’ girls. “Bad-girl femininity” then, is the idea that young women reject traditional notions of emphasized femininity but create a type of femininity that is socio-culturally relevant to them and their community. That is, girls and women in gangs develop a femininity characterized by

acting rough and tough and not “traditionally feminine.” Hence, actions taken by these young women are carried out in order to accomplish a particular type of femininity.²⁰

Miller (2002a) takes issue with Messerschmidt’s (1995, 2002) conceptualization of the way in which gang girls “do gender.” She states that the problems of understanding and applying structured-action theory to gang girls as “bad-girl femininity” is four-fold because: (1) the argument is tautological; (2) “bad girl femininity” fails to challenge gender dualism; (3) “bad girl femininity” fails to account for gendered, raced, classed, and sexualized power hierarchies; and (4) structured action framed within this context does not allow for the accomplishment of agency. If, however, these four points are accounted for, then one may be better able to apply structured-action theory to better understand the unique ways in which young women and girls “do gender” within the context of the gang.

Miller’s first disagreement (2002a) with Messerschmidt’s (2002) explanation of “bad girl femininity” is that it is a tautology. That is, the nature of his argument- that gendered actions stem from gendered norms, which then, in turn, reproduce gendered actions- invokes a type of circular reasoning. In fact, Miller (2002a) cites Hood-Williams (2001) critique of Messerschmidt’s logic: “... and why is this [criminal behaviour] masculine? Because men do it. The argument is clear: every (criminal) thing that men do is masculine” (p. 45). According to Messerschmidt’s (1995, 2002) argument, girls in the gang are not “doing gender,” but rather they are “doing [a specific type of] femininity” which, by definition, means that everything these women do is a deviation of femininity and thereby only redefines the construct. If we are to understand the way in which girls in the gang actually “do gender” then we need to understand the range of genders that are available and not just “different variations of normative femininity” (Miller, 2002a, p. 438).

²⁰ For an interesting discussion of cholas’ refusal to conform to traditional notions of femininity and beauty, see Mendoza-Denton (2008). Their refusal to conform alienates these girls from dominant society because their use of cosmetics for something other than their intended purpose means that they are symbolically “subverting” traditional notions of femininity. The author explains this idea as the girls being “free from the ‘Oprah effect’” (p. 160), or the idea that all women should have similar desires which are constructed by that which is portrayed by the media. If these girls fail to share these traditional notions of femininity, they are in some way less feminine.

The second way in which structured-action theory may be adapted to account for gang girls' experiences is by avoiding the gender dualism that "bad girl femininity" creates. Because gender is fluid and malleable, its various forms are accomplished at different times and in different settings. In other words, the gender continuum is not finite; it does not have a beginning or an end and consists of more than simply "masculine" and "feminine." If, however, we are to understand young women's gendered behaviour within the gang as a "bad girl femininity," then gender duality is necessarily implied (Miller, 2002a). "Bad girl femininity" does not necessarily account for those girls and young women who actively challenge notions of culturally normative, heterosexual femininity. Therefore, in order to better understand young women and girls' gendered expressions within the gang, we must avoid dualistic notions of gender.

In her ethnographic work, Miller (2001) found that girls within the gang are not necessarily doing "bad girl femininity" or "doing difference" for that matter. Rather, they are "doing masculinity" in order to construct a masculine identity for themselves. She cites empirical evidence from her study of (primarily) African-American gang affiliated girls: "As with the girls' accounts, these young men did not view the girls in their gangs as enacting a 'bad girl' femininity, but a masculinity that was incongruent with their sex" (2002a, p. 444). Miller (2002a) and other scholars (see Thorne, 1993) refer to these particular gendered behaviours, which fail to conform to normative definitions of femininity, as "gender crossing." The concept of gender crossing is particularly relevant in terms of understanding gendered behaviours as dynamic rather than static and immobile. In fact, Miller (2002a) uses the example of young women's "policing of one another's sexuality within these gangs" (p. 445). She notes how the policing of sexuality occurs when young women, who identify more with the "tomboy" label, subsequently "put-down" other women who exhibit more traditionally feminine behaviour.

Conclusion

Much of the literature has failed to address the interconnectedness of structural constraints and the role of agency in the identity formation of young, gang-affiliated women (for exceptions, see Mendoza-Denton, 1998; Miller, 2001; Moore, 1991; Vigil, 1988, 2007). Scholars who adhere to quantitative research methods may inadvertently

essentialize and thus reproduce raced, classed, gendered, and sexualized beliefs about these women and their experiences because they fail to take a critical stance in order to understand the constant interplay between macro and meso-level institutions, and how they impact people on the micro level. In addition, quantitative research fails to historicize, politicize, and contextualize the lived experiences of the groups and individuals being studied. In contrast, critical theorists have a tendency to blame institutionalized beliefs, values, and practices as being responsible for confining individuals and groups of people and denying them space to negotiate their own lives and the world around them. To a large extent these women have very little space in which they can negotiate their lives in accordance with dominant beliefs and values in order to create a life—or lifestyle—that resembles that of their mainstream counterparts; however, they can and do use resources at hand in order to negotiate and construct a meaningful identity that works within the context of their lives. When history and context are taken into account, it becomes clear that all individuals have the capacity to employ agency in order to at least partially construct a meaningful identity. Thus, it is imperative that we look beyond the seemingly impenetrable superstructures that confine all individuals (particularly those who have been marginalized by social practices) and allow them to tell us about their thoughts, values, beliefs, dreams, and actions in order to understand how they construct their own identities and self-worth.

The national media fuels society's fear of the issue and exaggerate young, gang-affiliated women's failure to conform to socially prescribed roles like being kind and nurturing (Males, 2010). Denying these young women an arena to express themselves on their own terms leads society, as well as scholars, to dissect this understudied and misunderstood group's experiences and behaviours, pejoratively label them, and impose identities on them rather than allowing them to express their own understandings of their complex identities. It is therefore necessary to talk to these women on their own terms in order to understand some of the ways in which they construct their identities through gang affiliation and the ways in which their identities are simultaneously constructed for them (Kolb & Palys, 2012). That is exactly what the current dissertation set out to do.

Dissertation Organization

In the proceeding chapter, I will discuss methodology and the methods employed to obtain and analyse the data. I argue the importance of employing a feminist epistemology and intersectional framework in order to understand how the participants in this study were allowed to create, through their narrative, a meaningful ontology. In addition, I discuss the research setting, the population, and how the research process commenced.

In chapter three I expand upon Miller's (2001) and Schalet et al.'s (2003) research and examine the gendered and sexualized nature of gang roles for females in Chicana gangs. I discuss the discursive, behavioural, and corporeal differences between homegirls and hoodrats and explain the distinct roles of the women who hold these symbolic titles. I emphasize the importance of narrative construction in the formation of identity and reject the idea that narrative embellishment is necessarily something that impedes our understanding of identity construction. Finally, I explain how the construction of these gendered roles are culturally, spatially, and temporally relevant for the participants in this study.

In chapter four I focus on participants' experiences in correctional settings, specifically prison. While it is generally accepted that Chicanas and Latinas incarcerated in California state prisons tend to group together based on their locality, they tend not to splinter into their street-gang units. During the course of my research, some participants suggest that identity with their specific gang is less important in prison because all Southern California gang-affiliated Latinas become subsumed into one group, either Sureñas (Southern California) or Norteñas (Northern California). Thus, while prison life is less about gangs and more about relational patterns in other types of units, many of the women in this study spent time in prison, and thus their experiences need to be addressed and taken into account.

Chapter five focuses on women's experiences exiting the gang. There is limited research describing the gang exit process, particularly with regards to gang-affiliated women. This chapter adds to the limited research and provides a more in-depth understanding of the qualitative experiences of women who have left the gang or are in

the process of disengaging. Perhaps more importantly, this chapter assists our understanding of how identity for and among participants is (re)constructed once they no longer view themselves as gang-affiliated and, thus, no longer engage in the gang lifestyle. Implications of this identity shift are discussed.

Finally, I conclude by arguing that understanding the experience and ontological positioning of the participants in this study require us to move beyond the criminogenic nature of their lifestyles. In order to gain a holistic understanding of the multifaceted identities individuals—particularly women who have traditionally been marginalized—(re)construct for themselves and others and the lens through which they develop these understandings, it is important to take into account their interactions with various structures and institutions. Policy implications and future research directions are discussed.

Chapter 2. Methods and Methodology

This research is informed by a gender-specific epistemology and an intersectional framework. Framing the research in this manner has allowed me to gain a more thorough understanding of the ways in which larger socio-structural factors, mid-level institutional factors, and individually situated behaviours intertwine and are involved in the construction of identity for and among Chicanas involved in gangs in the Los Angeles area. Both critical frameworks force researchers and activists alike to take participants' raced, classed, gendered, and sexualized experiences into account when understanding how they actively and passively co-construct their identities by acknowledging the participants as experts in relaying their narratives.

A Need for Gender-Specific Epistemology

Studying the lived experiences of women in general and women engaged in gangs specifically, requires more than traditional "masculinist" theories of criminality. Traditional theories tend to compare women's experiences to those of men and, in doing so, pathologize women, particularly women who have traditionally been marginalized and oppressed. In order to gain a more complete picture of gang-affiliated women and their experiences, I will draw generally upon feminist criminology, and I will specifically emphasize the importance of intersectionality – the ways in which race, class, gender and other identity markers intersect and play a role in identity construction (Chesney-Lind & Jones, 2010). Chesney-Lind (1989) argues that it is not sufficient to use existing theories that explain male delinquency and "add women and stir." Instead, we require a feminist approach that incorporates the roles of "patriarchal arrangements" and the multitude of other ways in which women have traditionally been oppressed in order to explain the unique ways in which participants in this study have come to understand their unique lived experiences. Development of a feminist approach to delinquency requires scholars to take women's gendered experiences into consideration. It is

necessary to acknowledge the role that patriarchy plays in this process and how it is manifest in women's lives.

Patriarchal attitudes are expressed in many ways, one of which is through the perpetration of physical and sexual abuse – two phenomena in which women and girls are more likely than men to be the victims. According to Chesney-Lind (1989), the outcome of these types of abuses against girls and women are “associated with more severe trauma- causing dramatic short- and long-term effects in victims” (p. 21). Thus, girls and women may be more likely than boys and men to suffer long-term consequences associated with the trauma. While it was not my intention to explore their traumatic experiences, the majority of the participants in this study voluntarily reported a history of physical and/or sexual abuse as a child and/or an adult. Because their histories of abuse were so pervasive and had such significant implications regarding the ways in which these women understood themselves and their roles in the world, a brief discussion of this gendered form of violence is necessary.

In addition to childhood abuse, women experience significantly higher rates of domestic violence than men (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). In their study, Tjaden & Thoennes found that women are 2.9 times more likely than men to be victims of domestic violence, have a significantly higher frequency of physical assaults perpetrated by their male partners, and are significantly more likely to fear injury and receive threats. Likewise, Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, & Daly (1992) found that women were victims of domestic violence more than men. While some researchers have de-gendered the phenomenon of domestic violence and suggested that symmetry exists among men and women involved in these relationships (see Gelles & Straus, 1988), others have argued that the data on which these conclusions are based do not adequately reflect the different types of domestic violence that occur (e.g., Johnson, 1995). Patriarchal terrorism—one type of domestic violence—is “a product of patriarchal traditions of men's right to control ‘their’ women” (Johnson, 1995, p. 284). This type of violence is gendered in nature, rooted in power and control, and tends to escalate over time.

Burns (2001) argues that media and popular discourse are responsible for de-gendering the problem of domestic violence. While the problem of domestic violence is

often de-gendered, Burns argues that blame is not. In other words, women are either held accountable, or equally responsible, for the abuse or blamed for fighting back to protect themselves. Ignoring the power that men hold as a result of patriarchal beliefs and discourse “diverts attention away from men's responsibility and the cultural and structural factors that oppress women and foster violence” (Burns, 2001, p. 277) and sends the message that men and women share responsibility for abuse perpetrated by men. This message, which is deeply rooted in patriarchal beliefs about the roles of men and women, allows the cycle of abuse to continue and forces women to assume responsibility for it, leaving men unaccountable for their behaviours.²¹

A Need for Critical Evaluation

Understanding identity construction for and among gang-affiliated women requires a critical lens that not only acknowledges the role of the embeddedness of patriarchy but simultaneously acknowledges that we cannot rely only on patriarchy to explain and understand situated behaviours. There is a tendency in feminist-based research to use patriarchy as the defining factor in women's socialization, thoughts, values, and behaviours. While it certainly should not be ignored, using it to describe the totality of women's experiences blinds us not only to women's multifaceted experiences as raced, classed, and gendered subjects, but also to the ways in which women are active agents in their own lives. Women are not simply victims of social and systemic inequalities, but are also agents who create and impose identities for and among themselves and others respectively.

Neglecting women's perceptions of their experiences and roles within gangs, coupled with the patriarchal nature of mixed-sex gangs, often precludes explanations for women's roles and their behaviour within the gang. Acknowledging prevailing patriarchal norms and how they influence social constructs such as race, class, and gender is

²¹ This is not to ignore the fact that women can and do perpetrate intimate partner violence (IPV); however, because more extreme forms of IPV tend to be gender-based, it would be remiss to ignore the implications of structural inequalities and power dynamics involved in these types of relationships.

crucial in order to understand how women view and come to understand their own lived experiences. As such, it is important to place participants' narratives within their historical and political context.

Conducting qualitative research requires that the researcher be intimately engaged with the data and the analytic process (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012). When studying racial and ethnic minorities, it becomes even more crucial to engage in this process through a critical lens in order to gain a more complete understanding of the various intersecting systems of inequality that shape and are shaped by participants' everyday lives and their understandings of their lives. Critical theory forces scholars and activists to question the idea of a democratic and egalitarian nation-state and the systems that operate within our social, economic and political spheres (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002). According to Kincheloe and McLaren (2002), critical theorists are "perpetually searching for new and interconnected ways of understanding power and oppression and the ways they shape everyday life and human experience" (p. 306).

Using critical theory, then, allows us to critique and question hegemonic norms, ideas, and relationships that we often take for granted. It helps us to analyse power relations between those who have power and those who do not. Because the purpose of this study is to examine formerly gang-affiliated Chicanas' understandings of their own identities as racial/ethnic minorities, women, and as individuals from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, using an intersectional framework is most appropriate. Acknowledging the implications of various identity markers opens up space for participants to explain how they interpret the impact of these markers within their lives, allows for an understanding of the fluidity of identity, and creates a more complete picture of the women's lived experiences.

In addition to helping account for the implications of intersecting identity markers, critical theory also examines power within relationships, allows us to better understand the nature of insider and outsider groups, the meaning of the unequal power distribution that ensues as a result of these groups' formation, and how that power is negotiated by both parties. Indeed, it is important to note that the distribution and negotiation of power plays a role in the ways in which individuals' identities are constructed for and by them.

Importantly, even “out” groups re-create power-imbued hierarchies and are responsible for physically and discursively distancing themselves from others who are considered to be part of the same marginalized group. Use of critical theory allows us to recognize the matrix of power and power relations that are inherent in our everyday lives. Using a critical lens allows us to critique this distribution of power in order to better understand how and where human agency lays and how it can be achieved (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002).

For example, Collins (1991) points out that we must create space in order to understand and allow for the emergence of agency among women of colour. She argues that there is no monolithic “black woman” culture (or any monolithic culture that only takes into account one or two identity markers), but “rather there are socially constructed black women’s cultures that collectively form black women’s culture” (p. 44). Expanding upon this idea, one objective of this dissertation was to provide us with a better understanding of the social construction of a Chicana gang culture that is culturally relevant within a particular space. Using the results to explain a “Chicana culture,” “female gang culture,” or even “gang-affiliated Chicana culture” in other locations, not only would be problematic because doing so would essentialize an entire group of people, but it also would dismiss other socio-spatially, politically, and economically relevant factors in these women’s lives. If women of colour play an active role in defining themselves, rather than allowing hegemonic discourse to uniformly define them, then they are, arguably, rejecting objectification and acting on their own behalf, on behalf of their communities, and women of colour as a whole. In other words, using a critical approach allows participants to define, in part, their own sense of agency and develop an individual and collective consciousness based on their oppression.

Acknowledging the role of power and its embeddedness in identity (re)construction was central to interpreting and ultimately understanding participants’ perspectives of their positions within the larger social environment, their communities, and their gangs. Allowing participants the space to discuss their role—both active and constrained—in the public and private sphere, helped capture the dynamic nature of their ontological positions. In other words, participants were able to explain the unique ways in which power dynamics are created and recreated for and among them and how

this was related to agency. Thus, engaging in critical research allows participants space to explain the impact of power on and within their lives and assists scholars to evaluate how individuals negotiate it.

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) acknowledge the presence of five important elements that inform critical race methodology in the field of education. Because the authors advocate the importance of transdisciplinary work, those involved in the fields of criminology and sociology could gain critical insight into the lives and experiences of marginalized populations if they incorporate Solórzano and Yosso's perspectives into their methodological framework. First, they argue, critical race methodology (CRM) recognizes "the intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination" (p. 25). Incorporating this methodology encourages academics and advocates to acknowledge the intersectionality of various identity markers and the impact of these markers on the individual's subjectivity. Similar to Collins (1991), they argue that acknowledging "difference" as being one factor or another (i.e., being a woman or being Black) does not adequately take the totality of a woman's raced, classed, gendered, and cultured experiences into account.

Second, working from a CRM encourages academics to challenge dominant ideologies and traditional modes of inquiry. Traditional paradigms call upon and incorporate white, hegemonic masculine epistemology and deny various other ways of knowing, understanding, and interpreting the world. Thus, abiding by these traditional epistemologies, in effect, silences those who do not share the same experiences. Third, working from a CRM encourages educators to acknowledge the importance and legitimacy of experiential knowledge of people of colour and use this knowledge as a reference point for discussions about marginalization and subjugation. Fourth, CRM requires the incorporation of a "transdisciplinary perspective" (p. 26) whereby various disciplines inform our knowledge and understanding of issues faced by marginalized individuals, a practice that allows for race and racism to be historicized, politicized, and contextualized. Finally, CRM encourages academics and activists to work towards social justice. Incorporation of an inclusive methodology such as CRM necessarily denotes the importance of social justice because it opens up dialogic space for others' stories to be heard and epistemologies to be understood (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Historically, Chicana feminism borrows heavily from ideological frameworks such as Critical Race Theory (CRT), the Chicano movement, and United States' feminist movements (Zavella, 1993). However, these frameworks on their own proved insufficient in helping to explain various identity markers relevant for Chicana identity and fail to centralize the Chicana experience as being socially, ethnically, and culturally relevant in their own right. CRT, for example, largely ignores the “oppressive authoritarianism’ [that exists for Chicanas and certain other oppressed groups] under global capitalism” (Davalos, 2008, p. 158). Understanding the role of capitalism in creating and maintaining inequalities for oppressed groups (i.e., the way in which the American educational system is responsible for transmitting and reproducing capitalistic values to young students) is one tenet of the Chicana feminist philosophy. It must be stated that the Chicano movement is dominated by patriarchal ideology and ignores the gendered and sexualized experiences of Chicanas (Elenes, 1997; Zavella, 1993). Finally, United States' feminism - also argued by Davalos (2008) to be “hegemonic feminism,” or socially and culturally “relevant” feminism adopted by white, middle-class women - systematically ignores the experiences of women of colour, lesbians, and fails to integrate a post-colonial epistemology necessary to understand their unique experiences. Davalos (2008) employs the concept of the “dialectics of doubling’ in which women mimic patriarchy even as they struggle against it. She calls this ‘feminism-in-nationalism’, a term which avoids the binary (feminist versus patriarchal), accounting for the ways in which feminist action or language exists in sites of oppression and erasure” (Davalos, 2008, p. 159). Despite the recent inclusionary efforts of the mainstream feminist movement, it nonetheless overshadows and subsequently fails to include a Third World/Chicana feminist epistemology which not only account for the raced and classed experiences of women, but also for the role of colonialism and neo-colonial practices that have impacted women’s lives.

The term “Chicana” is radical in its own right because it simultaneously represents and acknowledges historical, political, economic, and social struggle while liberating Chicana-identified women from the confines of hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic feminism. Davalos (2008) argues that the use of the term “Chicana” “advances intersectional analyses by consistent reconsideration of multiple social positions - not just race, gender, class, and sexuality, but also language or migration -

and the ways in which these intersections are changed by varying social realities” (p. 165). Chicana identity, then, is not only an amalgamation of various, fluid identities but also a political movement --- one in which the Chicana body is the political and social site of resistance. Adoption of the term “Chicana,” in the development of a critical conceptual framework relevant for criminology (and all social sciences, for that matter), is vital because the term necessarily acknowledges the multiplicity and fluidity of identities.

While Chicana feminists do incorporate elements of feminist and critical race epistemologies, they have moved in a unique direction in order to create an epistemological standpoint that reflects the significance of embodying a bicultural, or *mestiza*, identity. In fact, Chicana feminists acknowledge the historico-political, social, and economic conditions that have impacted the lives of Chicanas. Contextualizing lived experiences encourages scholars and activists to recognize and acknowledge the fluidity of identity—racial/ethnic, gendered, and sexual. Chicana feminists, then, employ these principles methodologically to engage with participants and inform their research. While I am not Chicana and thus arguably cannot be a Chicana feminist, I do believe that the tenets of Chicana feminism as an epistemology and methodological tool are important to incorporate into this research because they allow for a more nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of the participants in this study. Within the context of gang research, incorporating ideals of Chicana feminist epistemology to understand the sexed, gendered, raced, classed, and cultured experiences of Chicanas involved in the gang not only acknowledges the complex nature of their subjectivity but also allows discursive space for agentic practices.

Academics and activists need to work together to develop and incorporate theory and praxis into their respective academic and social milieus. A new theoretical framework needs to be developed, one which encompasses self-definitions and self-valuations and takes account of agentic performances (whether linguistic, behavioural/performative, or through the passage of ideology), by all non-hegemonic groups, and in particular, marginalized women. Critical theory incorporates many strands such as post-colonial thought, certain feminist epistemologies such as Black feminist thought, and Chicana feminism, to name a few. For the purpose of this dissertation, I will

focus on Chicana feminist thought to provide a framework that takes into account the intersectional experiences of the participants within the study. I think it important to point out the basic tenets of Chicana feminism in order to create a fuller understanding of the phenomena being studied.

Research Questions

My initial research questions were as follows:

1. How do gang-affiliated Chicanas decide who is part of and who is not part of the gang? What do these roles look like and how are the women who perform these roles described by one another?
2. How do each of the women negotiate insider versus outsider status within the context of the gang? What does this process of role negotiation look like?
3. What patterns and themes emerge regarding the gang lifestyle with respect to raced, cultured, and gendered roles?

However, Becker (1998) encourages researchers to “extend our ideas and images to accommodate more of the ‘real world’” (p. 18). Palys and Atchison (2014) add that this is particularly appropriate when entering a social world as an outsider where a primary objective in any phenomenological undertaking, almost by definition, must be to remain open to the views, understandings and priorities of those one is researching. Consistent with these views, I approached the research acknowledging that my research questions were open to change and revision depending on what my participants said and where the data they shared led me.

Method and Sampling

The Site

The participants I interviewed were all clients or employees of a well-known gang-intervention organization called Homeboy Industries. Homeboy industries is located in East Los Angeles and serves individuals of all racial and ethnic backgrounds who are looking for a means to leave the gang lifestyle. My interest in the experiences of

Latinas in gangs is twofold: (1) I am familiar with East Los Angeles, and the Latino community in Los Angeles in general, due to my former employment as a social worker in that area; and (2) my experience working with at-risk Latino/Latina youth led to my interest about what gang affiliation means and how it is perceived by women. I sought out Homeboy Industries as the desired site for the research because of the large, diverse clientele they serve.

The Sample

Mason (2002) argues that sample size is largely dependent upon generating enough data in order to answer the research questions. Although true saturation of data is often never truly reached (Mason, 2002), Becker (1998) argues that throughout the research process a researcher can generate so much data that they must be able to reasonably decide when to end data collection. While Charmaz (2005) argues that stopping at saturation leads to haphazard data collection, I made the decision to sample enough participants “to make meaningful comparisons in relation to [my] research questions” (Mason, 2002, p. 136).

Choosing “messy,” or, negative cases from which to sample often aids in creating a more complete picture of the phenomenon being studied (Becker, 1998; Mason, 2002; Palys & Atchison, 2013). Palys and Atchison (2013) argue that “the core principle is that one should always look for the toughest test of one’s developing theories because they are the ones that are most likely to cause you to rethink what you think you know” (pp. 114-15). Including these cases may disconfirm concepts previously thought to be true, and forces the researcher to rethink, or reconstruct previously-conceived theory. In this study, I have incorporated negative cases, or cases whereby certain participants’ accounts diverged from other participants’ statements or understandings of certain phenomena, in order to provide a more detailed, complete, and credible account of the lives of the participants.

My sample was purposive – a criterion sample (Palys, 2008). The decision to sample purposively was based on the nature of my research questions and my access

to Homeboy Industries. The criteria I implemented to determine participant eligibility were:

- Chicana
- Current or former gang member
- Age 18 or older

The first two criteria were obvious because they are consistent with the scope of the research. The age criterion was added to avoid issues such as breaching confidentiality due to a need for parental consent, to ensure that the participants were all participating based on their own decision to do so, and to avoid other potential legal matters associated with interviewing minors.

I was interested in Chicanas' gang experiences; thus, I sought out a specific sample that included the aforementioned criteria. Specifically, I used theoretical sampling in order to explore concepts, which were relevant to the participants, in greater depth. In the case of interviews, this included interviewing participants in order to understand the issues that they define as being important and then developing theory to help understand these concepts. Theoretical sampling is a cumulative process whereby the researcher builds on knowledge gleaned from each participant. Their conceptual foundation starts on a broad level, and they are able to refine their understanding of specific concepts by following up on leads as they continue through the interview process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Incorporation of a critical race and Chicana feminist methodology creates space for participants to talk about broader themes that they interpret as being relevant in their lives, and allows the researcher to ask follow-up questions to gain a more nuanced and contextualized understanding of these issues.

Mason (2002) argues that sampling (in this case, participants) across different contexts "increases our chances to being able to use that very detail not only to understand how things work in specific contexts, but also how things work differently or similarly in other relevant contexts" (p. 125). In the case of my research, I chose to interview women from different gangs in order to explore what types of similar dynamics existed among the participants as well as the nuanced differences.

Purposive sampling allows the researcher to select participants based upon the specific criteria that they wish to study (Palys, 2008). In my case, I was interested specifically in Chicanas' experiences in gangs. The purpose of my sampling choice was to interview participants who met the criteria to help me answer my research questions. Because my sample consisted of women who identified as Chicana, it was appropriate to incorporate an epistemological framework and methodology that acknowledged the unique raced, classed, and gendered experiences of the participants. The purpose of my research was to understand "a process rather than representing a population" (Mason, 2002, p. 136). In other words, it was to understand the experiences, beliefs and values of the women within the classification system I used (Mason, 2002). In the end, I interviewed a total of 25 participants, but eliminated one interview because the participant's responses were limited to single word answers. Data analysis was based on the remaining twenty-four.

The interviews

Because of the nature of my research questions, I chose to conduct in-depth, qualitative interviews. All interviews were minimally structured. I began each interview by generally explaining my interest in Chicanas' experiences in gangs in the Los Angeles area and encouraged each participant to talk about experiences in their lives that they felt were important in understanding their own identities, past and present. Consistent with critical race and Chicana feminist epistemologies, I facilitated a more conversational-type interview process whereby the women were allowed to talk about whatever they felt comfortable sharing, and I followed up with questions that encouraged them to elaborate. During the first few interviews, I attempted to elicit certain types of information that I thought would be most relevant, but I quickly learned that my views about the information that I thought "mattered" was not theirs.²² As I continued conducting the interviews, I used the knowledge that I gained from previous interviews to gain a better understanding of the topics the participants believed were relevant.

²² This is discussed in greater detail in the section entitled "Reflexivity."

The Process

Interviews ranged from one to three and a half hours, with the average interview lasting two hours. Participants ranged in age from 18-56. I also formally interviewed one permanent, African-American male staff member about his perceptions of gangs in the area and women's roles in gangs and talked to other permanent staff members on an informal basis to gain a better understanding of the organization and their perceptions of the programs and its clientele. When I was not conducting interviews, I spent time walking around the organization talking to clients, or sitting in the lobby or the Homegirl Café observing people's interactions. Homeboy employs former gang members to work at the agency in various capacities such as cleaners, front desk workers, and employees in the cafeteria. Because the organization's philosophy is, "Nothing stops a bullet like a job," it offers employment opportunities to individuals who often have no history of employment, few work skills, and are often deemed unemployable because of their physical appearance (i.e., facial, neck, hand, and skull tattoos). The purpose of the jobs program is to teach employees important work skills and provide them with work experience they can list on their resume. Because of the high demand for jobs, Homeboy uses a lottery system to select new workers whenever they have openings. Every Friday morning, hopeful men and women sit patiently in the lobby of the organization's building waiting for their name to be called. Because of the work program as well as counseling, skill training, and other programs (such as tattoo removal), there are many current and former gang members and individuals who are looking to get out of gangs milling about the organization. When I was not interviewing participants, I spent time in the lobby and café observing employee and client interactions, exploring the programs offered within the agency and talking to employees, but I did not sit in on any counseling groups due to confidentiality issues.

I was granted permission to conduct research with clients and employees at the organization by Veronica Vargas, Director of External Affairs. Both she and her assistant, James Horton, were initially responsible for selecting participants for me to interview. During the second and third trips to Homeboy, participants began to refer their friends—also affiliated with the organization—to me. Ms. Vargas and Mr. Horton chose participants based upon the criteria that I provided and participants' availability. For

example, Homeboy employees do not necessarily work every day, and clients do not attend the agency every day so Ms. Vargas and Mr. Horton selected participants who were at Homeboy each day that I conducted interviews. Their goal, they said, was to allow me to interview as many women as possible who met the criteria I had outlined. As such, I do not have any reason to believe that certain participants were selected based on social desirability or that they best represented the agency and would reflect the agency's goals in a positive manner. In fact, I did interview some participants who were ambivalent about moving away from the gang and gang lifestyle despite their participation in programs at Homeboy. After three trips to the organization and spending several weeks talking to Homeboy staff and clients—both informally and during the formal interview process—I was informed that I had interviewed all of the women who both met my criteria and wanted to participate.

Chesney-Lind and Hagedorn (1999) argue that gang research would benefit from longitudinal studies of women involved in gangs. While this is, of course, ideal, it was not possible in my case to conduct a longitudinal study due to the unpredictable work schedules of employees and the often transient lives of the clients. For example, I interviewed one woman who was homeless along with several others who were living with family members and friends. Because there were some women who did not have stable residences and simply were struggling to survive, it was unreasonable to expect them to be at the agency every day. In addition, cell phone numbers were prone to change. I did not follow up through email because I wanted to maintain confidentiality and did not want any information – electronic or otherwise – to be traced back to the participants. In sum, due to the life challenges of some of the participants, the possibility of a longitudinal study would have been exceedingly difficult.

While paying participants for their time can be controversial (Hutt, 2003), access to the organization and participants was contingent upon compensation. Prior to arriving at Homeboy, Ms. Vargas and I agreed that participants would be paid \$40 in the form of a Visa gift card for their participation in a two-hour interview. While some interviews fell short of the anticipated two hours, women were still paid the \$40. Participants whose interviews lasted longer than the allotted time received an additional \$10. Reciprocity was important to obtain data because most of the participants were employees at

Homeboy and took time away from their work and/or treatment schedules to share intimate details of their lives. In this case, compensating participants was necessary in order to gain access to a difficult-to-reach population. As such, the benefits of compensating the participants outweighed any limitations that may have arisen from lack of compensation.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity, or examination and evaluation of one's beliefs and experiences during the research process, plays a large role in qualitative research. It is crucial for the researcher to acknowledge the lens through which they view the research throughout the data collection process, analysis, and the writing of the final product in order to fairly represent the data and, specifically, to honor the words of the participants. Stanley (1993) states that, "Reflexivity here is located in treating one's self as subject for intellectual inquiry, and it encapsulates the socialized, non-unitary and changing self-positing in feminist social thought" (p. 44). She further argues the importance of locating oneself within the larger social structure and, consequently, understanding how we are shaped by social structures. Understanding ourselves within this complex process allows us to have a more complete understanding of our role(s) within the research process and allows us to more clearly understand our participants' voices.

As important as it is to understand our own positioning and critically evaluate the lens through which we see the world, we must also be aware of the ways in which our worldview informs our understanding of our participants' lived realities and subsequently impacts our research. Fine (1994) argues that qualitative researchers have a tendency to construct master narratives during the course of their research because they interpret and understand participants' voices through a universal lens (p. 73). Creation of a master narrative not only imposes identities on participants, but creates an essentialist ontology that undermines the rigor of the research process. Fine echoes Cornell West (1988) and states that in order to move away from this colonizing practice and honor the voices of participants, researchers must acknowledge macro-level practices that maintain hierarchal power relations within the research process (i.e., using Us vs. Them discourse). Second, she argues that researchers must recognize every-day practices

that work to oppress marginalized individuals and understand how they impact the lives of participants. Finally, we must be mindful of the exploitative raced, classed, and gendered practices that are so deeply rooted in our social, political, and economic systems (p. 76). Researchers who fail to maintain a reflexive stance throughout their research process ironically run the risk of engaging in the very practices they attempt to counter through their work. That is, they may unwittingly reproduce oppressive power dynamics by denying participants a meaningful ontology.

Becker (1996) argues that while participants know their individual and, perhaps, collective (i.e., raced, classed, or gendered) experiences best, researchers who do not identify with the group whom they study can and do bring a nuanced understanding to the research process. For example, through the use of different epistemologies and methodological practices researchers may expand upon the limits of what we know about a group of people. Thus, while researchers obtain broader information about a particular group of people because they have not shared their lived experiences, they may be able to elicit information that fosters a new perspective or understanding (Becker, 1996).

While Fine (1994) also disagrees that only those who identify as part of the group being researched should be allowed to conduct that research, she does argue that researchers must be mindful of the tendency toward “imperial translation” (p. 80). To avoid this, researchers must be inclusive of everyone’s voice within their research, even if certain data do not fit neatly within the context of the other data, something to which Becker (1990) and Palys (2008) refer as acknowledging “messy cases,” or rival plausible explanations. Engaging in reflective and reflexive research yields more rigorous methodological practices. Further, in order to promote transformative, social justice-based research, researchers must consistently acknowledge the importance of both context and historicity. In other words, researchers must ground participants’ voices in history and their social, political, and economic context.

While conducting previous research and discussing the direction of future research interests, I was asked whether or not it is possible, or even justifiable for an educated white woman from a middle-class background to undertake a project to which

she cannot and never will be able to relate on a personal level. I argue that undertaking this type of work - particularly because it has, in part, been framed within a critical context - is feasible but only if the researcher is able to maintain an appropriate reflexive stance. My own location as a white woman involved in academia allows me various privileges in life, specifically the privilege to be able to speak out about issues such as sexism, racism, classism, and Eurocentric, hegemonic practices and be heard. Why should my voice be privileged over the voices of those who have truly struggled? Why should their voices only be heard through my work? What strategies of resistance can be used to disrupt the privilege I have and allow these women's voices to stand on their own? In order to advance academia socially, politically, and methodologically, academics and activists alike must take these questions into consideration, incorporate a reflective and reflexive position, and critical perspectives to accurately reflect the participants' voices. Research, such as mine, does not do anyone justice if its sole purpose is research. Instead, it is imperative that critical research involving marginalized and oppressed individuals and groups be shared with community activists and community members so that these important issues can be addressed. Working within a social justice-based model is a collective process in which everyone with a vested interest in community-based issues must participate. Indeed, change and empowerment are processes that do not occur within the bubble of academia, but through collaboration within communities.

Grounded Theory

I used grounded theory as the analytical approach to work with the data I collected. That is, I remained aware of my own thoughts, beliefs, and understanding of the phenomenon I was to study, but remained flexible enough to allow for the emergence of themes and patterns. Qualitative researchers acknowledge that trying to understand human beings and their individual and collective experiences poses certain challenges that must be recognized throughout the research process. Acknowledging these challenges is crucial to engaging in rigorous research and honoring the voice of the participants. One concern raised with social science is the tendency for researchers (particularly those who come from a place of privilege) to construct participants as "Other" and in doing so, colonizing the research process and participants (Fine, 1994).

Grounded theory is a method used in qualitative research that allows for a systematic analysis of data which, in turn, encourages the research to remain flexible and accommodating to unexpected, emergent findings. Charmaz (2005) describes this technique as both “a method of inquiry and the product of inquiry” (p. 507).

Grounded theory allows for transparency within the research process and forces the researcher to acknowledge her role of power throughout. The process is iterative which, in my case, meant that I was consistently moving between my research questions, the data, and my analysis in order to allow the meaning(s) of the data to emerge. I remained flexible and open to emergent patterns and themes. For example, when beginning this endeavor, I was initially interested in understanding how Chicanas involved in gangs acquire and perform agentic behaviour through language use, corporeal expression, and negotiation of space. I had some ideas about how they might engage in corporeal expression and use space in order to negotiate agency despite the constraints which they faced in their lives, and indeed these issues emerged somewhat, though they were not as relevant in the lives of the participants as I previously thought. What I unexpectedly learned was that my understandings of these women’s corporeal experiences were not their understandings. In fact, the issues I was most interested in uncovering and developing were essentially non-issues in the lives of these women. They had far more salient experiences and issues they brought to the interviews and upon which they expounded. This did not mean that some of my understandings about role of race, culture, and other structural constraints were entirely incorrect but rather that my understanding of their experiences was not theirs – something that added to the uniqueness of my findings and to the overall research process.

Engaging in the practice of grounded theory also allows researchers to compare the similarities and differences that exist within the data. It forces us to ask what systems may be at work in the lives of people and how these individuals personally (or collectively) experience these systems (Charmaz, 2005). That is, how do they accept and/or resist constraints placed on them? In the case of my research, I sought to understand how the women I interviewed negotiate(d) their lives based on the various situations to which they were exposed in their lives. In other words, the women were all Chicana and all were raised in poor families in the barrios in East or South Central Los

Angeles. Despite this, each participant experienced her own set of circumstances in life, which meant that each woman's identity also emerged from different contexts. The question then became: Based upon these similar circumstances and the participants' inherent personal differences, what type of viewpoints and understandings did these women bring with them as they interpreted their similar and unique experiences? Grounded theory encouraged me to uncover and develop a deeper understanding of this phenomenon.

Charmaz (2005) further argues that use of grounded theory is particularly important in social justice-based research. She suggests that "we can use processual emphasis in grounded theory to analyse relationships between human agency and social structure that pose theoretical and practical concerns for social justice studies" (p. 508). In other words, grounded theory allows us to understand that all social groups have hierarchies and that it is our responsibility to uncover what they are, what they look like, and how they evolve(d); It helps us understand who has resources and access to resources and who does not; and it encourages us to understand who has the power to make and enforce rules (Charmaz, 2005).

Defining Narrative

An important component of this project is narrative construction and the role of voice. I address the importance of participants' narratives by critically evaluating what they say and how they tell their stories. Our theoretical understanding of narrative and narrative analysis was developed through interdisciplinary work in the areas of socio-linguistic anthropology (Ochs, 1997; Ochs & Capps, 2009; Rymes, 1995), social psychology (Bruner, 1987, 1991), and sociology (Becker, 1963) to name a few. Narrative is a tool that allows individuals and groups to make meaning of and organize their thoughts and experiences (Bruner, 1991). While narratives are informed by experiences, they assist in shaping individuals' understanding(s) of their experiences (Ochs & Capps, 1996). Schiffrin (1996) argues "that the self neither pre-exists all conversation nor arises just from interlocutors' responses; rather it arises within conversation" (p. 169). In other words, because the individual is defined through the narration of experiences, and meaning is made of experiences through the telling of a story (or sequence of stories),

narrative is necessarily a representation of the self (Ochs & Capps, 1996). Thus, it is important to acknowledge that the discursive construction of one's "experience" does not necessarily constitute a true "reality." Rather, it is important to question the authenticity of the narrative and distinguish the role that cultural factors may play in the data collected (Miller & Glassner, 2010).

Fragmented narrative and narrative asymmetries are common-place. The problem with ignoring these narratives is that the researcher exerts her power as researcher over the interview process and the interlocutor, thus privileging certain individuals while discounting others. This process creates and maintains a power differential and leads to what Ochs and Capps (1996) refer to as "linguistic oppression" whereby one person has the power to decide what is relevant and what is not (p. 34). They further contend that: "Differential control over narrative content, genre, timing, and reciprocity is central to the constitution of social hierarchies. Narrative practices reflect and establish power relations in a wide range of domestic and community institutions" (Ochs & Capps, 1996, p. 34). During the course of this research, I did not necessarily seek out dominant stories that would lead me to give preferential voice to one participant over another, nor was it my intent to look for absolute consistency in stories from all participants. Becker (1998) argues that researchers should look for "messy cases," or outliers to construct a more complete picture of reality. Ignoring negative cases creates researcher bias and leads researchers to only include those stories that "make sense" and/or those that create a particular image upon which the researcher may have decided prior to beginning her research (Becker, 1998). Engaging with the data in this way can be dangerous because the researcher denies certain participants discursive space to tell their stories and, therefore, does not paint a full picture of their realities.

Also important with respect to narrative analysis is acknowledging that narratives occur within specific cultural and cognitive schemas. That is, one can only share what is known to them and in a means through which they are able to communicate their stories. In other words, participants' cultural upbringing necessarily determines the type of lens through which they see and understand the world. This lens is also responsible for the ways in which individuals know how to and are able to talk about and share their experiences with others. It is impossible to share a story if that story cannot be

communicated through the language or experiences of the individual, which is necessarily a result of their cognitive schema. When conducting interviews, it is therefore crucial for the researcher to familiarize herself with the culture and the linguistic nuances fused by the participants in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the phenomena. For example, as a fluent Spanish-speaker and former social worker in the Latino community in Los Angeles, I was familiar with certain linguistic patterns, including Mexican slang, or *calo*, and “Spanglish,” which arose during the interviews. For this research, it was important for the women to be able to express themselves in their own terms and through their preferred linguistic patterns in order to create a richer, more complete story.

In her analyses of narratives, Byrne (2003) argues that narrative should be a “coherent story of the self” (p. 47). She proceeds to discuss the manner in which her participants’ narrated their stories and suggests that a lack of coherence, or lack of chronological order, was indicative of a “disruption to her narrative rather than giving direction and meaning to an unfolding story” (p. 47). This argument is problematic for two reasons. First, it implies that a coherent interview can only be attained if the participant follows the researcher’s linguistic protocol. This type of reasoning may lead the researcher to only account for dominant stories and silence certain participants. The second problem lays in the idea of authority. If the researcher decides what constitutes a coherent or an incoherent interview, she runs the risk of imposing her beliefs on the data rather than allowing the data to speak. The question then becomes: “Who has the authority to determine how ‘meaning’ is constituted within narrative?”

Riessman (1987) and Ochs & Capps (1996) argue that stories are not necessarily told in chronological order. Participants make meaning of their lives through their stories even if their narrative is not presented in chronological order. When an individual narrates her/his story, the story makes sense to the one telling it. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) further argue that “communication strategies may differ based on the intersection of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and nationality” (p. 146). That is, while narratives may be told in chronological order, there are different types of narrative structures that do not correspond with traditional modes of communicating one’s narrative (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 146). Different forms of narrative are

significant to consider because they may be reflective of how the participant views themselves, their experiences, and their worlds. It then becomes the researcher's task to locate the context in which the narrative is being told. For example, during my interview with one participant, it was difficult to follow the order of her stories. Little One²³ frequently moved from topic to topic and decade to decade. At first I was confused and often encouraged her to walk me through a timeline that made sense to me. It took me hours of data analysis to understand that she was telling me a story that made sense to her. Throughout the interviews, she made meaning out of her own experiences and was, in fact, conveying an intricate story to me. After listening to the interviews several times and re-analyzing the transcript, I realized that, in a round-about way, Little One was clearly making very important points – themes that were relevant and present throughout her life.

Ethical Considerations

Conducting research with live participants involves adherence to numerous ethical principles. I obtained oral informed consent from all participants prior to interviewing them. All participants were provided with a copy of the information sheet included in Appendix A. I verbally outlined all the information included in the sheet and explained that participation in the study was voluntary and that participants had the right to withdraw at any time during or after the interviews. In case they had any questions, concerns, or did opt to withdraw, participants were provided with contact information for my senior supervisor, Dr. Ted Palys, and me. In addition, I explained the importance of confidentiality - that I would anonymize participants' identities by asking them to choose pseudonyms and that they had the right to refuse to answer questions or redact any responses. I asked participants if they had any questions, and obtained their consent to participate and for me to use a digital recorder during the interviews. All participants in this study agreed to be recorded.

²³ In order to protect their identities, all names within this study are pseudonyms chosen by the participants.

Risk and Confidentiality

While the purpose of this study was to elicit information about women's conceptions of self-identity through their gang experiences, I anticipated that they would also disclose sensitive topics such as a history of abuse and/or participation in illegal activities. As such, there was the possibility that the women would disclose information that could cause psychological distress during or after the interviews. As a trained therapist who is able to recognize signs of distress, I was prepared to provide participants with the names and contact information of various agencies within the area. Participants shared painful stories about their lives and, at times, became emotional. I reiterated that they did not have to share anything that was too painful. After the interviews had terminated, participants were debriefed. I did not have cause for concern that they would experience enduring emotional distress as a result of the interviews, as they denied feeling triggered by feelings or sensations related to their trauma. There were no immediate risks to third party persons or to the organization itself; nor were there any risks to me.

Because of the sensitive nature of the topic, all interviews were conducted in a private location. I ensured all participants' confidentiality and explained that no identifiable information would be shared with anyone else. In addition, participants were referred to by their pseudonyms in my notes, on the digital recordings, and in the transcripts. All possible identifying information such as gang names, names of neighbourhoods, and names of fellow gang members were redacted in the transcripts if specific names were inadvertently mentioned. All information was stored on two encrypted USBs. One remained in my possession and one copy was given to Dr. Palys.

Data Coding and Analysis

After collecting the data, I listened to all of the recordings in their entirety and noted ideas that I had not previously considered. I transcribed all interviews upon my return home. Like the recordings and the field notes, transcriptions were anonymized in order to maintain confidentiality (Palys & Atchison, 2013). Once the transcriptions were completed, I uploaded them into NVivo, which allowed for systematic yet flexible data organization, coding, and analysis processes. In order to gain a thorough understanding

of the data I used line-by-line coding which allows the researcher to examine each sentence (or few sentences) and assign a descriptive label to it (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978). After coding all transcripts, patterns began to emerge from the data. In all, I generated 113 nodes, or categories, though some of the nodes were clustered into other relevant categories. After the initial coding process, I reviewed my transcripts and categories for accuracy and to determine how certain categories related to other categories. This resulted in more analytic coding, whereby certain categories were clustered together based upon more theoretical constructs.²⁴ Throughout this process, I also engaged in memo writing in order to elicit a richer, more detailed description of the data.

I was the only person involved in the coding and data analysis process which means that the research does not run the risk of problems related to inter-coder reliability; multiple researchers may have led to inconsistencies in the data. Despite this, I tracked my research decisions in order to ensure that I was consistent throughout the coding and analysis processes.

Authentic and Credible Research

Qualitative researchers seek authenticity, credibility, and transferability in their work (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). One way that qualitative researchers can ensure that their research is, in fact, dependable is through the creation of an audit trail whereby the researcher audits her work while simultaneously remaining reflexive, flexible, and systematic (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). In my research, I reviewed my data consistently throughout the transcription, coding, and analysis phases and kept careful track of research decisions made throughout each process.

Qualitative researchers claim to reject quantitative measurements that define rigorous research (i.e., validity, reliability, and generalizability) and, instead, opt to reflect

²⁴ For example, I categorized different aspects of prison life such as intimate relationships, the construction of families, and the challenges of serving time (to name a few). Upon a second and third round of analyses, these categories were grouped together to explain how life in prison is constructed based on certain factors.

rigor through a “different language,” or one that is more “reflective” of qualitative research. Terms such as “trustworthiness” and “accuracy of representation” are commonly used by these researchers to defend the merit of their work. However, engaging in this practice paradoxically re-inserts qualitative researchers into the qualitative-quantitative binary, thus reproducing the same discourse surrounding power hierarchies involved in research processes. In other words, engaging in this discourse necessarily means that qualitative researchers are, once again, placed in a position to defend the rigor of their research (Becker, 1996).

When, however, scholarly communities operate independently, instead of being arranged in a hierarchy of power and obligation, as is presently the case with respect to differing breeds of social science, their members need not use the language of other groups; they use their own language. The relations between the groups are lateral, not vertical, to use a spatial metaphor (Becker, 1996, p.12).

Becker argues the importance of recognizing that qualitative and quantitative researchers share a similar epistemology, but different procedures involving different questions. While quantitative research tends to focus on outcomes, qualitative research more likely aims to understand the processes by which those outcomes are produced in specific cases. In other words, these two methods of inquiry are interrelated, but view the same phenomena through different lenses.

Re-conceptualizing the idea of validity forces the researcher to reflect upon and explicitly discuss their research decisions while simultaneously acknowledging the ontological and epistemological framework upon which the decisions were based. I have approached my research from a post-modern feminist epistemology and have employed a critical lens in order to allow a more coherent and better understanding of how larger socio-structural and political systems converge and play a role in the lives of marginalized women involved in gangs. To deny that structures such as race, class, and gender exist and work to confine and constrain these women and their opportunities would be misleading and would lead to a misunderstanding of their experiences. However, failure to acknowledge how these women perform agency and subtly subvert these structural confines would deny them a meaningful ontology. Postmodernism suggests that no single truth exists, but rather there exist multiple truths waiting to be

discovered and developed (Borer & Fontana, 2012). Borer and Fontana argue that truth, or meaning making, is a collaborative process between interviewer and interviewee. That is, both parties are responsible for constructing meaning from the narrative through the back and forth process of active dialogue. Employing this epistemological stance facilitates a more authentic understanding of the research process and its outcomes.

Chapter 3. Homegirls, Hoodrats and Hos: The role of naming, blaming, and shaming in identity formation among gang-affiliated Chicanas

Introduction

There is a tendency within all social groups to construct and label certain members as outsiders (Becker, 1963). Through the creation of outsider status, by way of labeling and exclusionary practices, those who are responsible for creating and imposing the distinction, discursively and behaviourally, distance themselves from those perceived as not adhering to the groups' socially agreed upon rules. Groups establish and enforce rules through consensus by dichotomizing social actions as "right" or "wrong" (Becker, 1963). According to Dotter (2004), the construction of interactions that produce deviants, or outsiders, is primarily linguistic. He argues that "[b]y means of language, written and spoken, sociocultural meaning is created, negotiated, adapted, and ultimately passed on in time and space" (p. 2). When a group of people identify with one another based upon a particular set of rules, norms, and customs anyone whose behaviour deviates from these practices has the potential of being labelled an outsider.

In the case of female gang members, the significance of exclusionary practices in the development of individual and collective gang identity is two-fold. First, these women are excluded by conventional society but simultaneously may exclude other women within their gang for failure to conform to gang rules and expectations. In other words, these women's marginalized (raced, classed, and gendered), outsider status is constructed by society at large and subsequently internalized by them. In turn, they may respond to these exclusionary practices by rejecting traditional social norms, engaging in specific (often delinquent) behaviour, and adopting a socio-culturally relevant identity, one that does not necessarily correspond with that of conventional society. Second, women in gangs are also responsible for rejecting and distancing themselves from other

women within their gang for their failure to conform to gang expectations by ascribing labels to one another. Schalet, Hunt, and Joe-Laidler (2003) and Campbell (1987) specifically discuss the importance of gossip and put-downs as a means for gang-affiliated young women to simultaneously reject undesirable identity traits while constructing for themselves those traits seen as desirable.

In her observations of Puerto Rican, gang-affiliated women in New York, Campbell (1987) illustrated how these young women worked to create their identities by rejecting “various aspects of membership among three interlocking societal identities: class, race, and gender” (p. 452). She explained how these women negotiated the socially constructed roles imposed on them by the two distinct cultural groups to which they belong: Puerto Rican and American. These findings were replicated in other studies with women from various racial and ethnic backgrounds (Black, Latina, and Chicana) involved in gangs (Kolb & Palys, 2012; Miller, 2001; Moore, 1991). Campbell found that the young women in her study, who came from poor, welfare-dependent (and often single parent) families, and who often ended up receiving social assistance in their late teenage years once they became mothers, criticized other Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Haitian immigrants in their communities for being poor, slovenly, and lazy. In order to distance themselves from these stereotypes created by society and reinforced by the young women themselves, they rejected any identity related to being Puerto Rican and stressed their American identity. In addition, they shopped for name-brand clothing and often spent money on other material items and outings that could potentially enhance their image and distance them from being seen as poor by others in their communities. While this type of financial management has been argued by some to be irresponsible and self-indulgent (see Meissner, 1966), Campbell argued that it alternatively could be seen as “part of the development of self-image by rejection” (p. 457) and thus an agentic performance. In other words, these women actively constructed their identities through rejection of women seen as different and through behavioural practices thought to enhance their image and bring them closer to mainstream (white, middle-class) practices.

Likewise, the young women tended to establish norms surrounding sex and sexuality for themselves and the other women. For example, despite the fact that “Latino

culture” (Portillos, 1999) emphasizes the importance of maintaining one’s virginity until marriage, these women, who often found themselves at odds with their two cultures, constructed an “acceptable” middle-ground when it came to sex. While being a “ho” (or, whore) was looked down upon, being sexually active at a young age was acceptable but only if the young woman remained in a monogamous relationship or had a series of monogamous relationships (also see Miller, 2001; Schalet, et al., 2003).

From her data, Campbell (1987) shows how young Latinas negotiate the norms, values, and rules established by the two distinct cultures to which they belong and simultaneously work to ensure that their own marginalized identities are not further compromised by associating with women whose behaviour was at extreme odds with conventional expectations. While gang affiliated individuals are constructed as outsiders by society at large, they also are responsible for creating outsiders within their social milieu. That is, the power differentials, that exist between society and marginalized gang members are reproduced by gang members themselves in order to construct outsiders within the gang. What we shall see in this study, then, is how gang-affiliated females mimic coercive practices imposed on their gender and sexuality by institutions such as schools, the Church, and the criminal justice system, and use these practices to legitimize their own marginalized positions through rejection of certain female members and adoption of certain behavioural practices.

A plethora of research suggests that it is not only men who police women’s sexuality but women as well (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002). After an extensive review of the literature, Baumeister and Twenge (2002) concluded that women are often responsible for upholding the sexual double standard (i.e., that men are permitted to engage in certain sexual practices while women are not) and condemn women who engage in similar sexual practices (p. 166). The authors found that adolescent girls’ (who are in their formative years of sexual development and self-expression) sexual suppression is significantly more informed by communication with their mothers than with their fathers. In addition, girls’ sexuality is influenced by their female peer group. That is, female peers are often responsible for influencing one another to avoid engaging in behaviour that could be seen as promiscuous. The authors conclude their review by suggesting that women are not simply passive victims of sexual oppression resulting

from patriarchal beliefs and control but rather agents who play a role in the shaping of permissible sexual practices and repression of female sexuality. While it is undeniable that women are, in part, responsible for shaping certain beliefs and enforcing particular practices within their lives and the lives of others, the authors' simplistic conclusion largely ignores the role of power differentials at play within the larger social environment. Ironically, ignoring the role of patriarchy, history, culture, and socially constructed hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality and making the claim that women are responsible for their own sexual repression is repressive in its own right because it suggests that they are the sole perpetrators of their own oppression. In order to better understand how women are impacted by the socio-political institutions in their lives, as well as cultural influences, it is important to examine how women actively negotiate the systems that constrain them and which they actively contest.

Narrative Contradiction and Discursive Construction of Identity

Gang researchers have long argued that gang members tend to exaggerate their experiences and present a glorified image of themselves as either more or less deviant (for example, Campbell, 1984; Hagedorn, 1996). While this is likely true (as I suspect was the case with a number of the narratives presented here), I echo Ochs and Capps' (1996) argument that the way in which a story is told is arguably just as important as the story itself because it provides insight into the interlocutors' understandings of their worlds. In fact, they argue that "narratives are versions of reality" that reflect one's beliefs about one's life (Ochs & Capps, 1996, p. 21). Despite the interlocutors' possible exaggeration about their actual experiences, their narratives tell the listener what she heard, saw, or what she hoped had happened - all of which is integrated into their understanding or perception of their reality. The constitution of individuals' or a groups' reality is reflected in how they make meaning of situations, whether those situations happened to them directly or not. Understanding and appreciating this phenomenon helps researchers gain a more complete picture of the main idea(s), or concepts being communicated.

Howard Becker (1998) suggests that defining a concept reflects some ground of commonality in stories. He suggests that "another way of defining a concept is to collect

examples of things we recognize as embodying that to which the concept refers and then looking for what inevitably messy and historically contingent ideas people routinely use have in common” (p. 111). In the case of the current research, I inferred that some participants exaggerated their stories when those recounted stories appeared unclear or even “over the top.” Once I suspected this might be the case, I probed further and reframed the questions. When I did this, the content of some of the stories changed slightly. Despite the differences with respect to personal context of the narrative, many women shared similar stories. For example, all of the women described what it meant for a homegirl to be “down” (give deference to her gang), and all of the women argued that their role within the gang led them to be “down.” Despite the consensus of the definition and the assertion that they could, in fact, define themselves accordingly, some women’s narratives about their own actions during their periods of gang affiliation did not correspond with their description. Hearing fragments of similar story lines from different people (regardless of whether it happened to them in the exact way in which they say it did) suggested that the story, or stories, reflected some element of truth, or at the very least, a collective belief or agreement about a specific concept (Flicker, 2004).

Some of the narratives seemed riddled with contradictions. On one hand, the participants reported that they saw themselves as equal to their male counterparts because they spent the majority of their time hanging out with them rather than with the other women; they distanced themselves from the other women whom they referred to as being “hoodrats” because they did not want to be associated with partying too much, being too promiscuous or being disloyal. While they reported that they had equal status with the men, some women also reported that homegirls had to work harder than the men to be seen as “being down” and achieving that status. On the other hand, many of the women simultaneously reported that their roles were to back up the guys and that they did not engage in the same types of gendered crime as the men. Despite this, they were still considered homegirls because of their closeness to the homeboys. Some of these women even reported homegirl status despite being engaged in the very behaviours they chastised in other female members.

To illustrate this narrative contradiction, both Alma and Vanessa saw themselves as part of the core group of homegirls, yet engaged in behaviours that other homegirls

may have considered less than respectable. Both women were addicted to methamphetamine – a drug frequently used by gang members in Los Angeles, though its use is simultaneously looked down upon, and engaged in sexual relationships with homeboys from rival gangs. Alma reported that she had been “checked,” or assaulted, by her fellow homeboys for both infractions but that after being checked she resumed her status as homegirl.²⁵ Vanessa, on the other hand, reported being intimately involved with a rival gang member who fathered one of her seven children. She denied being subjected to a beating due to her infraction and even argued that her relationship with her child’s father was considered acceptable by her homeboys. In fact, she reported that while she was in a relationship with this particular man, his homeboys unexpectedly showed up at a party Vanessa attended with her homeboys and homegirls and stabbed several of her homeboys. When probed about the conflict of interest in dating a rival gang member, whose gang perpetrated an attack on her homeboys nonetheless, she stated, “I don’t want to talk about that no more.”

Homegirls vs. Hoodrats and Hos

Participants demonstrated how they were responsible for imposing and constructing insider and outsider status for themselves and other females, as well as being enforcers of a hierarchal system established by male gang members. While participants reported that being a homegirl meant that a girl/woman was a true gang member because they emulated male behaviour, hoodrats—also referred to as “hos” by the homegirls—did not participate as frequently (or at all) in overt criminal behaviour. In addition, the homegirls reported that hoodrats engaged in overtly feminine behaviour, something the homegirls eschewed because it devalued and disempowered their roles as true homegirls. Despite the fact that some of the hoodrats were reportedly responsible for hiding the gang’s arsenal of drugs and weapons, their role was

²⁵ Other participants consistently reported that once a homeboy or homegirl gets checked, he or she loses status within the gang. Interestingly in Alma’s case, she was checked for a behavioural infraction (becoming too dependent upon methamphetamine) and a sexual infraction, usually considered reprehensible by homeboys and homegirls alike. Alma’s actions, by most participants’ accounts, would demote her to the status of hoodrat, though she continued to refer to herself as a homegirl who had her homies full respect.

interpreted as being a “woman’s” role, something from which the homegirls tried to distance themselves.

Power-imbued status, that was necessarily gendered in nature, was established according to three criteria: (1) how a woman gained entrance to the gang; (2) her willingness to engage in delinquent acts, also known as “putting in work,” with true members willing to “do anything” for their homeboys to prove their loyalty; and (3) chastisement of overt sexuality displayed through corporeal practices such as dress and the way a woman “carries” herself. Through their rejection of certain women, based on their corporeal practices and inability or unwillingness to engage in delinquent acts, many of the women in this study constructed themselves as true homegirls, or, “one of the guys” (Miller, 2001, 2002a).

One of the predominant ways in which women in this study were able to demonstrate how “down” they were (prove her loyalty to the gang) was by “putting in work” for their gang. The importance of putting in work and being down was two-fold. First, women distinguished themselves from other female gang members who did not engage in delinquent acts and thus legitimized themselves as true gang members who were down for the gang. Second, women who considered themselves true homegirls distanced themselves from other female members who chose not to put in work, explained that true homegirls were able to ascend the gang’s gendered hierarchy thereby gaining status as “one of the guys.” While gang-affiliated females were significantly less likely than their male counterparts to engage in serious criminal activities,²⁶ putting in work for females often involved fighting with rival gang members, tagging, selling drugs, and, less frequently, more extreme acts such as theft, car theft, engaging in drive-by shootings or being present during stabbings or murders. While young women who engaged in more extreme delinquent acts have often been masculinized and demonized by society for stepping outside the bounds of what constitutes “appropriate” behaviour for females (Chesney-Lind, 2006), engagement in these types of criminal endeavors might actually have worked in these women’s favour

²⁶ This is consistent with other qualitative and quantitative accounts of female gang members. For example, see Miller (2001).

within the gang context by allowing them to claim more power and higher status within the gang. Many of the women claimed to engage in illegal activities on behalf of their homeboys in order to work towards a more respectable status, one whereby they could be seen as more down and thus more like one of the guys. Becoming a true homegirl, then, was a process whereby members must engage in various steps in order to prove how down they are.

Gaining Entry

Women gained entry into the gang in one of two ways – being jumped in, or being sexed in. Being jumped in involved receiving a beating for a pre-determined number of seconds from one or, more often, several female gang members, though some women reported they were jumped in by male gang members, a practice they reported made them more respectable. Being sexed in involved engaging in sexual acts with a male gang member, or being gang raped. Getting jumped into the gang, or as Melissa suggested, “getting in the right way,” was the first step in acquiring the coveted homegirl status. In addition to homegirls earning their label through their method of entry, they had to maintain their status by not acting like a hoodrat or ho. That is, in order to maintain respectability as a homegirl, they did not engage in promiscuous sex with the homeboys or homeboys from other gangs (Shalet et al., 2003). Instead, many of the participants reported that they were either involved in monogamous relationships, or that they identified as lesbians and thus were not interested in engaging in sexual relationships with the homeboys. Often, women who were jumped in looked down upon those who were sexed in because they were seen as degrading themselves sexually in order to become gang members (Kolb & Palys, 2012). Homegirls tended to reject these women and their ties to the gang while they simultaneously affirmed their own status as “homegirls,” or “true” gang members.

Once a women decided she wanted to be “for” their neighbourhood (officially becoming a member of the gang), she had to be initiated to gain entry. Initiation into the gang was always a gendered process unless someone was “born in,” or “walked in” as a result of family engagement within the gang. For example, participants suggested that women who were “jumped in” to the gang were more respectable than women who were

“sexed in” or “trained in” because they did not have to use their sexuality but rather their “toughness.” The terms “sexed in” and “trained in” were sometimes used interchangeably, but, depending upon the participant and her gang, could be differentiated based on willingness to engage in a sexual act to enter the gang. While some women who were sexed into the gang, did so by having sex with one or more male gang members by choice, women who were trained in were often the victims of gang rape perpetrated by male gang members. Women who were sexed in or trained in were promptly relegated to outsider status because they had used their bodies and, more significantly, their sexuality as a means of becoming part of the gang. In addition, there was an expectation that hoodrats continue engaging in sexually promiscuous behaviour with the homeboys. In other words, only a ho would attempt to gain entry by using her sexuality, which meant that there was an expectation that she would continue to use her body in order to maintain her connections with gang members. Homegirls, on the other hand, reportedly only engaged in monogamous relationships with homeboys, though some of the participants reported engaging in sexual relationships with other women on the streets. This was one of the more complex findings, as it suggests the fluidity of gender and sexuality and how the performance of both constructs is both temporally and spatially relevant with respect to identity construction.²⁷

Though some researchers have suggested that the portrayal of emphasized femininity and display of sexuality is used by women in the gang in order to create an oppositional femininity appropriate within the gang context (see Portillos, 1999), Miller (2001) argued that the participants in her study did not subscribe to any type of femininity but rather to masculinity. The data in this study echoed Miller’s findings and suggested that females within the gang worked hard to ascend a gendered hierarchy and strived to attain equal status as their homeboys.

AK: So when you get jumped in, is it something that you're proud of when it happens?

Melissa: Yeah. I was really proud of it.

AK: What makes it such an important moment?

²⁷ This concept will be further discussed in Chapter 4.

Melissa: In a lot of different neighbourhoods, a lot of different girls, they walk in, like where nobody puts hands on you. When you walk in its like, 'oh, you got into the hood, but you didn't get jumped in.' And a lot of people don't respect people that walk-in. Or females who, I guess they say ... getting 'fucked in'...sexed in, you know? You have sex with one of the guys to get in. They don't respect you, you know. If you do something like that to them it's like, "oh you're just ho." You're not even from the hood so... I said 'no, if I'm gonna get in, I'm gonna get in the right way,' so I took my little beating and I.... That's how I got in.

Three of the women interviewed reported walking into the gang, but did not report any opposition to their initiation. They believed that the gang was receptive to their presence because they had influential family members calling the shots within the gang. Whether or not women who walked into the gang were seen as problematic or not, women who walked in and women who were jumped in indicated that women who were sexed in were less respectable because of their willingness to use their sexuality as a means for membership.

Participants reported that men and women of all statuses within the gang spent a considerable portion of their days and evenings together hanging out in the street or in the park, holding meetings, or partying. All females involved with the gang, whether perceived as members by the other women or not, were often present at these group get-togethers. In other words, homegirls are often forced to occupy the same space and be in close physical proximity to the women they perceive as being hoodrats if they want to be part of and privy to the goings on of the gang. This creates a problem not only because the homegirls are physically unable to distance themselves from hoodrats and thus minimize the likelihood of being perceived as such, but they also perceive the hoodrats as being a threat to their relationships with the homeboys.

Alma: [Girls who get fucked in] don't have respect. You're just considered a hoodrat. That would be even worse. You might as well not even be from there 'cuz if you're from there and you get fucked in it's like you're just the ho-- all you want is our men. We take that serious. We take that as... If I knew a girl and she got fucked into the hood and my man is with her kicking it... like uh uh. That's a big no-no. I'd be like, 'you'd better get away from my man because I know you're a ho 'cuz you got trained. Three or four *vatos* [dudes] fucked you to get in the hood!'

Alma, like all of the participants, argued that women who were sexed into the gang did not have respect. Interestingly, none of the participants reported being sexed into the gang. Research indicates that women who have engaged in sexual acts prior to entry—whether by choice or not²⁸—and consider themselves gang members—are looked down upon (Miller, 2001; Schalet et al., 2003). In fact, some studies report mixed findings as to whether the homeboys consider any of their female counterparts as having equal status (even those who perceive themselves as homegirls) to them (Miller, 2001; Moore, 1991), a factor that some women suggested was responsible for them having to work harder to prove their loyalty and earn respect.²⁹ Despite their efforts to avoid exploiting their own sexuality (i.e., choosing to get jumped in rather than sexed in, engaging in monogamous relationships, or in lesbian relationships), homegirls perceived their status within the gang and their relationships with the homeboys as being threatened by hoodrats' overt use of sexuality.

Putting in Work

Within Mexican gangs, participants often distanced themselves from women they perceived to be hoodrats by labeling them as such, stating that they avoided spending time with them whenever they could, and did this by distinguishing themselves as members who put in work instead of using drugs and having sex with the homeboys. After being jumped in, putting in work was required for these women in order to continue distancing themselves from other female members. For example, Arlene openly talked about the tattoos she earned as a result of putting in work for her gang. Certain tattoos, she explained, represented different crimes committed against others in order to show respect for her hood, something which, in turn, earned her respect from her homeboys.

Arlene: I got my neighbourhood [tattooed] over here [pointing to the side of her neck] and on my neck twice. All those I earned from doing some crazy shit. Shit like...I don't even wanna talk about it. It was

²⁸ See Schalet et al. (2003) for a discussion of “discourse of sexual autonomy” (p. 111) among female gang members.

²⁹ The staff member at Homeboy Industries whom I interviewed—an African American male—reported from his discussions with male gang members that female gang members did not hold the status they reported to have held. For further discussion of this, see Miller & Brunson (2000).

pretty much some burnt out shit, like pretty bad. The one on my back – BK – blood killer. You can get that if you pretty much put in work on a black person from a blood gang. I have a GK - I call them queers - but it's 'Gear Gang.' I think they're Crips. I've got a GK, too, for putting in work on them. All of this-- I just wanted to get a portrait of where I was raised... in LA. Here's my hood again. I just know that my hood tattoos were earned every time I put in work or I did some dumb shit. The BK and GK was putting in work too.

AK: GK is...

Arlene: Gear Gang

AK: Killer?

Arlene: Yeah well when you have a 'K' it's pretty much... you know, like Blood Killer, Gear Killer.

AK: And you have to earn those?

Arlene: Yeah. You can't just get it on you. Some people nowadays will be like, "I'm BK this or that" and it's like, "no. You ain't BK until you kill a slob; until you put in work and you do something." You really gotta earn them. Nowadays people take it serious. You can't just go and call people 'BK this.'

While serious crimes such as murder were typically reserved for male gang members, Arlene reported that she wanted to show she was down for her hood and did not want to be known as someone who "didn't do shit for the hood." In order to prove how down she was, Arlene stated she took as many opportunities as she was offered to engage in crimes traditionally reserved for male gang members (i.e., "slashing out" other gang tags in rival gang neighbourhoods and participating in drive-bys). Having earned the right to have tattoos representing the serious crimes she committed was one way Arlene distinguished herself as a down homegirl and considered herself to have status equal to the homies.

Angel, like Arlene, reported that she was just as respected, if not more so, as the guys in her gang because of her willingness to put in any work asked of her.

Angel: ...Earning it [homegirl title]. Just putting work in for the neighbourhood. Most of the guys they like to get the girls, if anything, to be trophy pieces for them. I was never one of them. If anything needed to be done they would drive, and I would refuse to drive [during a drive-by shooting]. I'd be putting in work.

AK: What do you mean by work?

Angel: Shooting. I was a gunner. I loved it at the time. It was like a high for me

AK: Drive-bys?

Angel: Ummm, yeah, and some people that were just part of a crowd, and we'd get into it.

AK: So this was your role in the gang. You were a hard-core homegirl. You were one of the guys.

Angel: Yeah.

AK: What does it mean to be one of the guys?

Angel: Actually I think I had more respect than some of the guys because if something needed to be done they be like, "ummm we'll give it to so-and-so," and it would usually get handed over to me. "Give it to Angel, and she'll take care of it." I'm like, 'yeah, I'll take care of it real quick' because they knew that I would get stuff done compared to somebody that's new. I just liked it and my family being from where I'm from, I knew that I was untouchable. And some of these ones were first generation gang members, and I knew that I had family history. So basically I knew that I was untouchable and if anybody tried to step to me they'd be dealt with either by me or by my family members.

Angel explained how she distanced herself from "other girls" by saying that she was never a "trophy piece" for the homeboys. Through her discussion of her specific role within the gang, Angel discursively distanced herself from traditional female roles and, thus, other women. One of the ways in which she proved how down she was and how she was subsequently engaged in "doing masculinity," was through her role in drive-by shootings. She stated that she was never the driver, but rather was one of the people putting in work. Interestingly, Angel stated that she was the "gunner." Use of this term was highly symbolic for two reasons: First, because it suggested a military-like mentality. The idea of putting in work and showing her loyalty to protect her fellow gang members conjured the image of a patriotic soldier going to war to defend her country and fellow citizens. Because of the territorial nature of gangs in the United States, gang warfare is often executed in order to reinforce the boundaries of the hood, command respect from other gangs and exert power or retaliate for a wrong-doing. Second, Angel's use of the term was also significant because it suggested her highly gendered role—that of an

infantryman, or someone whose role it is to fight the enemy on the front line. Participation in drive-by shootings, according to Angel, meant that she had earned the trust and respect of her male counterparts. In fact, Angel had to work hard by putting in work in order to avoid being seen as “just a girl.” She reported having to put in *more* work than her homies in order to reach this status. This suggested that while it may be possible that some women are seen as being just as down as the guys, the fact that female members saw themselves as having to live up to their male counterparts’ status and work harder than their homeboys to do so, they still might not be seen as equals (Miller, 2001).

Angel continued and stated that there did exist a noticeable gendered difference between the men and women, one that was imposed by men but to which she (and other homegirls) clearly subscribed.

I felt like I was one of the guys - a soldier. I didn't think it was fair that they were excluding the girls, but then I could see their point of view because a lot of the girls are just hoodrats out screwing guys from different neighbourhoods or from the neighbourhood. That never was me. When the girls wanted to party, they partied with guys from different neighbourhoods and everyone was screwing guys, and I be in the bathroom getting high. That was me.

Again, Angel used military imagery to describe her role within the gang. Angel engaged in traditional gendered discourse by contrasting herself as “one of the guys-- a soldier” while in the same instance referring to other women as being hoodrats who were engaging in more feminine behaviour. Angel stated that she felt badly for the girls because of the way they were treated by the homeboys, but she understood the homeboys’ position because the girls were merely sexual objects who only wanted to party, use drugs and have sex with the men – particularly men from different neighbourhoods – something she viewed as demeaning and taboo.

Alma, 18, stated that she was considered a homegirl because she worked hard to prove herself to the guys. She suggested that each time the homeboys presented her with “work,” she took the challenge and was subsequently granted more power, or higher status. While she never reached her goal of becoming an Original Gangster (OG) or *Veterana* (an older gang member with “veteran” status), Alma reported that she was a

true homegirl because of her willingness to put in work for the homies and the neighbourhood. Despite her belief that she was seen as being as down as the homies, Alma also reported that women had to prove themselves more than men in order to gain power because the homies saw the female members as being less capable. Interestingly, Alma suggested that women were more down than the men because they were smarter and able to use their looks to put in work.

Alma: There is some homegirls that are even downer than the homeboys. For real. There's not a lot of girls in hoods, but the ones that are will do anything. Like me, I can say that I'm downer than half of my homeboys... like, whatever you do, you can do it, just be smart about it. You have more power like that 'cuz people will see you and they won't even think that you could do something like that. That's how homegirls prove ourselves. That's how we prove ourselves. We're girls, we can get what we want easier. They taught us, you gotta know how to use what you got to get what you want.

AK: What do you mean use what you've got?

Alma: Like your beauty. You can use your beauty, like, to get somebody who's your rival. You can use your beauty to attract them and then do them dirty and then that's putting in your work.

The idea of a female using her beauty to prove how down she is contradicts the other participants' accounts whereby they report actively avoiding any display of their femininity and instead opting to adopt a masculine appearance instead. Her report of luring rival gang members by using her looks, however, is consistent with studies (see, for example, Cepeda & Valdez, 2003; Eghigian & Kirby, 2006) that report that some women perceive themselves as putting in work for the gang, but may, nevertheless, be considered fringe members as opposed to true homegirls. However, while others may interpret these women as being fringe members because of their overt use of their femininity, Alma explains how she and other women paradoxically use their femininity in order to exert and gain power and thus achieve (at least some) status within the gang. From other participants' accounts, however, it appears as though the women who are considered by both the homeboys and the homegirls to have the most power and respect are those who are most actively engaged in criminal endeavors and whose behaviours closely resemble those of their homeboys. In other words, females who do

masculinity (as opposed to varying degrees of femininity) are more likely to earn respect and power within the gang.

Rejection of Emphasized Femininity

Disdain for women who used or flaunted their sexuality while claiming gang membership was a common theme throughout the interviews. Participants were explicit about the importance of being down for the gang, something which necessarily entailed “doing” masculinity, or, engaging in criminal behaviour. Many of the participants rejected women who were perceived as being “sluts,” or “hos” because, they argued, these women were not showing their loyalty to the gang but rather using their sexuality to take advantage of their membership and party with the homeboys, use drugs, and have sex.

AK: How does that impact women involved in a gang-- when they're being judged based on their looks?

Angela: They look at them like pieces of meat. 'Oh, that's new meat coming in. How many people are going to be able to be with her?' They don't look at them as homegirls, they just look at them like some chick. They don't look at them as really from the neighbourhood.

AK: So there's a definite distinction between men and women involved in the gang?

Angela: Yeah, there can be. There are certain ones that they'll respect but it all depends on how you carry yourself, too. If you're dressed like a slut and you act slutty, of course they're gonna look at you like a slut. If you're dressed decent, and you always carry yourself in a proper manner, of course they're gonna look at you differently. And if you're dressed like a boy and you act like a boy, then, of course, they're gonna look at you totally different in another way. It all depends on how you carry yourself... I wasn't into too much [into wearing] makeup back then either. I always thought it looked funny.

AK: Would they [the women who wore lots of makeup] be labelled as hoodrats?

Angela: No, not really. Some of them would be but... I mean the ones that carried themselves in a particular way would be. The slutty ones-- the ones that always acted like sluts; they have a couple of beers and it was on-- of course they're gonna get labelled like, 'oh, she's easy. She is a hoodrat.' It just depended on how they carry themselves. Everything depends on how you carry yourself. Even in the business world you have to carry yourself in a particular manner.

Angela explained that there was, in fact, a difference between men and women within the context of the gang. It is women, however, who were responsible for disrespecting themselves and thus creating the distinction. While the men labelled women “sluts” and “hos” because of their sexual behaviours and treated certain women as “pieces of meat,” or as being useful only in their ability to provide sexual favours, the homegirls followed suit by rejecting these behaviours and labeling these women thereby distancing themselves from them in order to show that they are “not like them.” Similar to Kolb and Palys’ (2012) study, participants explained that the way a woman carried herself, or used her body, was important in terms of garnering respect from homeboys and homegirls alike. Women who emphasized femininity through their corporeal expressions (movement through space, use of her body and appearance) were looked down upon and seen as being too busy trying to get attention from the homeboys to participate in important gang endeavors. Conversely, women who carried themselves in a less traditionally feminine way, or as many suggested, like tomboys, saw themselves as being more masculine and thus, true homegirls.

When I inquired about hoodrats’ roles within the gang, I noted that while they may have lost status because of engaging in promiscuous sex with the homeboys, they also were responsible for holding the gangs’ guns and drugs. Storing guns and drugs in their homes seemed like it would be an important role within the gang because the members reported a need to hide them in a safe location. Participants were asked whether it was possible for a hoodrat to be down for her gang because of her willingness to help fellow gang members. Most participants, however, noted that this was not possible because hoodrats’ sexual proclivities were seen as too repugnant, thereby bringing disgrace on all of the women involved in the gang, and because hoodrats were quick to snitch if their activities were discovered by police. These two behaviours left hoodrats unworthy of respect by other gang members.

AK: So, can a hoodrat be down?

Michelle: [Shakes head no.]

AK: Not really?

Michelle: I don't know. Some people might say so.

AK: Who would say so?

Michelle: Ah, maybe some of the homies would. Some of the guys. The girls wouldn't.

AK: Why wouldn't the girls?

Michelle: Because they're making us look bad as females.

AK: How so?

Michelle: Because they're sleeping their way around into it, you know? They might be doing some of the work, too, but they're sleeping around with all the guys. I seen hoodrats who done jobs but lots of times when they do jobs-- when let's say the guys get busted or something -- they're the first ones to tell.

Michelle explicitly described the gendered “othering” that occurred among women in the gang. While some of the men considered hoodrats to be down because of the work that they did for the gang, homegirls did not consider them to be essential members. Despite the fact that some hoodrats were known for putting in work, Michelle noted that their eagerness to talk to the police if caught, combined with their reputation for being promiscuous, gave other homegirls a bad name.

Like Michelle, Melissa talked about the importance of homegirls creating and maintaining a “good” reputation for themselves. Again, the importance of the way in which a woman carries herself was significant. Here we see that it was not simply corporeal adornment, such as use of cosmetics and dress which was reflective of how a woman carried herself, but also the way in which she used her body. That is, sexual practices (whether monogamous or non-monogamous) were reflective of the way in which a woman carried herself and the respect that she earned as a result.

AK: Who decides who is a hoodrat and who is a homegirl?

Melissa: I guess yourself really. It's the way you carry yourself. If you slept with a gang of homeboys they're [men and women] not gonna respect you.

AK: And what is the importance of the way you carry yourself?

Melissa: What it is, is like, they feel like you're representing [my gang]. If you're just out here being a ho, you're giving us [women] a

bad name. So it's like you want to make a good name for yourself... not only for yourself, but for the hood.

Girls and women who have sex with multiple homeboys are rejected by other women in the gang because their behaviour reflects badly on the homegirls; those who engage in sex with multiple partners are not representing the hood in an acceptable manner, which subsequently makes all homegirls look bad. Similar to Campbell (1987) and Miller's (2001) arguments, monogamy for women is valued by society at large, and this value is an expectation for "respectable" women which is mirrored by the gang. To underscore this point, Melissa suggests that having sex with multiple homeboys makes all girls look bad because it is not considered acceptable behaviour. In other words, Melissa's description of respectable female sexual behaviour within the gang mirrors the social standards of society at large for doing femininity appropriately.

In another interview Angela differentiated the way other women carried themselves from the way she carried herself. Dressing like her male counterparts was important in order to gain respect from the homeboys, distance herself from hoodrats and be known as a true homegirl who was down for her gang and her hood.

I dressed like a boy. It was just, like, normal, but when I dressed like a girl I would get attention-- negative attention or sometimes you could get good attention-- but I just don't like the attention I would get. I didn't want people looking at me for my physical. If I'm dressing like a boy, then they see me for who I am on the inside. They get to know me instead of, 'oh look at her. She has a body and this and that. Who knew that underneath all those clothes she had curves?' I just preferred to dress like a boy.

Interestingly, Angela saw women who dressed more feminine as getting attention which detracted from the intended goal of being a homegirl. Emphasized femininity through corporeal expression was something that she avoided because she wanted to be taken seriously. Thus, she equated dressing like a boy with being down. During the interview she reported that she worked hard ("we [women] pretty much had to prove ourselves a lot more than the men") to prove herself as a loyal gang member. Part of proving herself involved doing masculinity by rejecting feminine attire and feminine behaviour that could be interpreted as her being like all the other women.

While traditional feminine attire was seen as taboo, women's use of makeup such as heavy eyeliner and lip liner has traditionally been associated with a "chola" style. Some of the participants, such as Angela, rejected the use of make-up, but a number of participants who considered themselves homegirls reported wearing it. According to (Mendoza-Denton, 2008), the strategic use of cosmetics among Latina women in gangs has been recognized to be an important identity marker that may actually be used to reject emphasized femininity and traditional notions of what Western beauty standards. While most participants reported that they stopped wearing the heavy makeup typically associated with gang-affiliated Chicanas and Latinas because it "looks stupid," Nicole suggested that it was one of the features that turned her on to the gang lifestyle and that it was not necessarily associated with being a hoodrat.

Nicole: They [cholas] wore heavy makeup: eyeliner, hairspray.... They colour their eyebrows in. The way they dress. At that time, I was probably wearing baggy clothes, big shirts. I don't know; I like that; I like that style.

AK: Is there any significance to the baggy clothes?

Nicole: What do you mean?

AK: As opposed to wearing tight clothes or fitted clothes. Is there any significance to walking around with the baggy pants and the baggy shirts?

Nicole: I don't know. I just felt comfortable wearing those clothes. I didn't have a lot of money either, like them. It was cheaper. But you could wear tight pants and stuff like that, too, but guys aren't going to respect you.

AK: Why not?

Nicole: They're gonna think you're probably like a hoodrat or something. So I kind of try to keep it low-pro[file].

AK: What would be bad about being a hoodrat?

Nicole: [laughs]. I mean guys don't respect you, they treat you like whatever. You're just another girl; you're not ... I don't know. They're nothing serious; they're just like, whatever.

AK: What do hoodrats do?

Nicole: They sleep with all the guys.

Based on Nicole's statement and the contradictory statements of other participants, it seems unclear whether women who wear the traditional chola makeup are truly down. Mendoza-Denton's study suggests that the girls in her study were homegirls despite their elaborate use of makeup; however, her study was conducted in Northern California among girls who identified as Norteñas. Thus, it is unclear whether her findings translate to the barrios of Los Angeles. Based on participants' reports, it seems that perceptions of makeup use may vary based upon the gang. In other words, some participants suggested that despite their use of makeup they were doing masculinity by putting in work and dressing like the homeboys, but with an added element of femininity.

Desiree, for example, talked about adding a "feminine twist" to the male gang style and how this was a common practice among gang-affiliated women and had been for decades. She reported that her sister, part of the Pachuco/a era of the 1940s and 1950s, wore the traditional Pachuco button-up shirts (Pendletons), but that "she had a nice little spaghetti shirt under." Despite all of their other efforts, it seemed unclear whether women who exhibited any form of femininity, like wearing makeup or any type of feminine attire, could ever really be one of the guys. However, from the participants' reports, it did seem likely that wearing makeup was deemed acceptable as long as the women carried themselves in a respectable manner and put in work. For example, one participant reported wearing heavy makeup paired with baggy, masculine clothes. She suggested that despite her use of makeup she dressed and acted like a homeboy and thus commanded respect. In other words, women might never be considered one of the guys but could earn a solid reputation as a homegirl.

This distinction is important because it suggests the existence of a gendered hierarchy whereby the males retain the power and control within the gang and are responsible for calling the shots or deciding who will complete each task. In other words, the more a female can emulate male behaviour (corporeally and through putting in work), the closer she comes to the coveted male status. Interestingly, gang-affiliated women are responsible for the creation of their own hierarchy whereby each female member is responsible for her position within her specific gendered and power-infused level (Kolb & Palys, 2012). Despite the fact that the participants reported putting in work

and essentially doing masculinity within the gang context, it appears unlikely that many of them were ever truly one of the guys, as they frequently had to clarify their status by reporting they had to work harder and do more than their homeboys in order to prove themselves as worthy members. While it might be argued then that a homegirl can never earn the title “homeboy” no matter her gendered and behaviour performance within the gang, she can, arguably, earn a strong reputation as a homegirl.

Street Socialization and Second Generation Gang Members

The findings here regarding gendered hierarchies, identity construction through narrative and the role of naming, blaming, and othering among gang-affiliated women largely echo those of Miller (2001) in her study of gender roles among female gang members in St. Louis, Missouri and Columbus, Ohio and those of Shalet et al. (2003) in the San Francisco Bay area. Women receive messages about how to be “respectable” from the larger social environment. These messages are then transmitted to and reproduced on the streets by male and female gang members and imposed within a culturally and socially relevant context. Individuals must learn to adapt to their social environments in order to avoid social exclusion, no matter their social or economic circumstances. Vigil (1988) argues that street socialization is the means through which gang-affiliated individuals learn to engage in socially relevant, gang-related behaviour, and meet social expectations on the streets. The findings in this study regarding gendered and sexualized hierarchies and girls/women policing one another’s sexuality within the gang context may echo those of Miller and Shalet et al. because, regardless of their racial/ethnic background, girls/women residing in marginalized neighbourhoods are subject to engaging in similar social practices in order to avoid rejection within their social milieu.

While Vigil discusses the process and role of street socialization among Chicano gang members in East LA, Miller’s participants (who were largely African American) and those who were involved in my research share similar social and structural hardships which socialize them for street life. The girls in Miller’s and my study spend more time on the streets as a result of loosening family ties, and they learn from one another as well as other family members accustomed to the street lifestyle how to “do gang” (Garot,

2010). Women who socialize with male gang members are more deeply entrenched in the gang lifestyle because they look up to male members and emulate their behaviour in order to gain status within the gang. This suggests that female members may, in part, learn from their male counterparts to reject other women, especially those who represent emphasized femininity, and create hierarchies based on the males' perceptions of what it means for a female to be down. Vigil (1988) argues that girls may act tough in order to gain attention from male members. He continues by stating that "the males always remain in command" (p. 102), which suggests that women learn to perform their gender in a way that commands respect from the homeboys.

In addition to street socialization, female gang members are impacted by the general presence of patriarchal beliefs and the ways in which these beliefs – through the exercising of power – are institutionalized and mirrored by gangs. Societal values that reflect gendered interests "trickle down" and are embraced by everyone, including individuals involved in gangs. They also are, in part, responsible for dictating rules regarding acceptable or respectable behaviour. In other words, understanding what is acceptable behaviour is a process that people learn first in their homes, school, and through the media. These beliefs and values are embraced by gang members and transmitted to those active within the gang, particularly women, through the process of gang initiation, putting in work, carrying oneself in a respectable manner, and simultaneously labeling and othering one another.

While the girls in Miller's (2001) study and the participants here faced similar structural disadvantages, Miller's study was conducted in cities with a newly emerging gang population whereas this study was conducted in a city with a long-standing gang presence. With respect to Miller's study, differing cultural experiences might not only differentiate Miller's sample from mine, but might also help explain why and how participants within my sample created gendered and sexualized differences among each other. Similar to the participants in Schalet et al.'s (2003) study, I also found that participants in my study negotiated "and, to a certain extent, accommodat[ed] constraining norms of femininity" (p. 111). However, six of the participants in my study identified as lesbians; they embodied a masculine appearance and carried themselves in

that manner. As such, these women actually *rejected* the idea that they embraced any notions of femininity.

In his review of the literature about second-generation gang members, Bankston (1998) argues that gangs form as a result of limited social opportunity. That is, second generation gang members are the result of their traditional cultural traits as well as traits of American minorities. Expanding this assertion, one can argue that second-generation status is particularly relevant when considering gang-affiliated females because of their marginalized raced, classed, and gendered status. While African American girls residing in the ghetto do indeed experience multiple marginalization on account of their gender, race, and socioeconomic status, Chicanas have the added dimension of socio-cultural positioning (Bankston, 1998). In other words, these women are essentially negotiating expectations of two cultures (Mexican and American), an experience that leads to the development of a new cultural identity (Vigil, 1988, 2002). As previously discussed, the participants in this study are negotiating Mexican culture, values and traditions passed down by their families, and American expectations learned from the media and particularly in school -- a process that leads to a cholo identity and subculture (Vigil, 1988).

As a result of this socio-culturally constructed identity, these youth embrace a unique style of dress and even language that originated with second-generation Pachucos in the 1930s and 1940s and has continued to develop in the cholo subculture that is prevalent today in the barrios of East Los Angeles. Cholo subculture has emerged among second-generation youth from the distinct culture created by their Mexican-American predecessors. Joanna spoke about the significance of her homies and homegirls having a unique vocabulary involving words, phrases, and sounds to communicate with one another and avoiding rival gang members' and other outsiders' detection of her gang's activities:

Joanna: There's a lot of slang, you know, the slang language that you use and everybody around there they all say the same things, you know. It just becomes like your own little language, your own little slang language. Yeah it's [also] certain sounds, clocking sound. That's what we used to do to distinguish...and that's because you know we lived in the hills so we were in the bottom of the hill we used to do the clocking sound to see if anybody was up there.

AK: So it's kind of your gang's own code to get in touch with each other?

Joanna: Yeah, pretty much that. I mean it wasn't like we had walkie talkies or anything... so that way when we used to go look for somebody in a house that was our house, that was our sign for you to come out like we're outside, you know.

Through historical and ongoing negotiation of two distinct cultures and subsequent cultural values, Chicano/as involved in gangs have developed their own subcultural norms such as communication patterns and dress in order to claim an identity that is culturally relevant to them.

During the interviews a number of the women spoke about the unique dress involved in Chicano/a gang culture. Desiree stated that she often wore men's clothing in order to fit in with her homies, but that she retained a unique Latina style. She stated, "I was wearing Pendleton shirts. They are all guy attire. I was dressing like a guy, but in a sense they had this female Latina twist. That's what I called it." Desiree was clear about the importance of creating and claiming her identity as a Latina living in East LA. In fact, she talked at length about teaching her son the importance of acknowledging his cultural identity when he started to spend time with his African American friends and adopt their style of dress.

...And I'm like, 'No. I really don't care if you have black friends. I really don't care. Just be yourself; don't try to act like him. You guys might be from different cultures, but you can have as many friends, but just be yourself.' He was having an issue, like "What do you mean by yourself?" And I'm like "Yeah, like be yourself! You know you are an American citizen, a Latino descendant. That's who you are." And I think it's very difficult for kids nowadays to... like... really know who they are in school, because they are so prejudged. And you know that's a lot of pressure.

Desiree recognized that people in her community (and specifically her children) struggled in an attempt to find and establish their own culturally relevant identity. From this excerpt, she explained how she tried to instill a sense of cultural pride in her son. By telling her son that he is "an American citizen, a Latino descendant," she acknowledged that her son was the product of two cultures and that both of these cultures were, in fact, relevant for him in order to have an understanding of his own, unique identity.

Interestingly, most of the women in this study were never taught that they were the product of two distinct cultures; this was something they learned from their interactions with their (often traditional Mexican) families, with their homies and homegirls, and within the American public school system. Often, these women were told that they were Latina and thus had an obligation to behave according to traditional Latino/a cultural norms. At school, on other hand, they were taught that they were American first and Latina second. In other words, they were taught to believe in and adhere to traditional American values and norms but were frequently reminded of their raced, classed, and gendered status because the information transmitted to them was not necessarily socially or culturally relevant to them.

Vigil (1988) argued that gangs are an outlet for second and third generation Chicano youth to express themselves and act out their frustrations despite the constraints placed on them. My findings echoed those of Vigil in that most of the participants explained that the gang provided them with a means of understanding their own identities by allowing them an arena in which they could express themselves corporeally and discursively, through delinquent behaviour, and through rejection of others seen as inferior. Among gang-affiliated Chicanas, the role of culture and specifically gendered expectations within both Mexican and American cultures is imperative to our understanding of the unique differences between Chicanas in the Los Angeles area and other racial minority women involved in gangs. The cultural dissonance that Chicanas experience may result in these women simultaneously accepting practices that shun other women for overt femininity and sexuality and reward masculine behaviour such as toughness and self-sufficiency. Despite the fact that all of the women within the gang experience marginalization based on their race, gender and socioeconomic positions, they also demonstrate how they organize themselves hierarchically through rejection of other homegirls gendered and sexualized behaviours in order to make a name for themselves and “be somebody.”

Conclusion

Similar to Jody Miller’s (2001) findings, the women in this study were adamant that they were equal to their male counterparts, yet they described distinct qualitative

differences between the gendered expectations and experiences of males and females. While they argued that women had equal opportunities to ascend the hierarchy within the gang and attain the same status as men, they described having to work harder than the men to earn their status. The participants stated that they spent most of their time with male gang members and were even their confidantes when the men talked about the various women with whom they were sexually involved. Despite this, the women's accounts were riddled with contradictions. They argued that they were equal to the men, yet they compared themselves to the men stating that: (1) despite their hard work, they would never be equal to men; or (2) they were "more down" than men because they put in more work, something which suggests that they may not have been considered equal to their male counterparts.

As in Miller's (2001) study, the participants here "described systematic gender inequality...which they themselves often upheld through their own attitudes about other girls" (Miller & Glassner, 2010, p. 138). They discussed the ways in which they simultaneously negotiated being equal to the men and recognized that neither they nor other females were entirely equal. They did this by establishing power for themselves by putting in work, establishing discursive control over one another's gendered and sexualized status, and by creating a name for themselves, in part, through rejection of other young women. The participants in this study suggested that gendered discrimination did not exist as long as they avoided engaging in behaviours seen as traditionally "feminine" – specifically, using their bodies to gain attention from the homeboys and showing they were down by putting in work.

While they constructed themselves as being "one of the guys," female gang members were simultaneously responsible for constructing other young women as "others." The women in this study suggested that in order to attain homegirl status they had to distance themselves from the outsider status of hoodrat. According to Miller (2001, 2002a), the policing of sexuality and enforcement of sexual codes within the gang are not intended to encourage the maintenance of a specific type of femininity, but rather:

To *minimize* gender difference by limiting the extent to which boys could apply derogatory sexual labels to the girls in the gang. Thus the girls'

policing of one another's sexuality- and the vilification of girls they deemed to be 'hos' and 'sluts'- allowed them to distance themselves from a denigrated sexual identity and maintain an identity as a 'true' member. (2002, p. 446, italics in original)

The young women within the Miller's study and mine blamed other females within the gang for their own victimization and mistreatment because of their emphasized femininity (Miller, 2001; Miller & Glassner, 2011, p. 139). It is likely then, as Miller (2001, 2002a) suggested, that these women were not simply constructing an oppositional femininity, nor were they "doing difference," but rather they were doing masculinity through their policing of sexuality and willingness to put in work as requested by the homeboys.

Despite the fact that Miller's (2001) sample consisted largely of young African American women in newly emerging gang cities, and the current study was based on Chicanas in a city with a well-established gang presence, there were many comparable social and structural factors which might account for the similarities in the findings of both studies. Both studies consisted of young women who faced social, political, economic and cultural constraints and were subsequently marginalized by society as a result of their race, class, and gender. This was apparent based on the communities in which they lived and the experiences they faced. Living a life of poverty as a result of being relegated to the ghetto or barrio bred a castaway mentality in which these young women were aware of their status as "other" within society.

It is likely, then, that in order to make sense of their own marginalized positions, these young women subscribe to larger societal beliefs about gender and sexuality and engage in the very behaviour that has been used to distance larger society from them. Miller and Glassner (2011) argue that gendered hierarchies are not unique to gangs, but reflect the "broader social environment in which gender inequalities were entrenched" (p. 140). By discursively constructing themselves as masculine and others as engaging in overtly feminine behaviour, these young women demonstrated how they distanced themselves from behaviour deemed socially unacceptable by society at large.

While these women were certainly constrained by larger social, political, and economic structures within their environment, there is no doubt that they also work, in

part, as agents who actively negotiated their social milieus and were responsible for constructing their own identities as well as perpetuating gendered beliefs through the creation of labels and subsequent shunning of other females for certain behaviours. In addition, these women demonstrated how they employed discursive practices to construct “other” status for females in the gang – a practice which is necessarily agentic. One of the women, Destiny, stated that “fear means respect” and “power is respect.” These women demonstrated how they earned and continued to command respect from males and females within the gang. If gang structure is, as has been suggested here, a reflection of the larger social environment, females do, to some extent, actively make decisions that set them apart from one another. Through their choices regarding their gang initiation, willingness to put in work, and through their corporeal expressions, these homegirls were able to negotiate their roles and simultaneously use discursive practices to distance themselves from one another.

Chapter 4. Playing the part: Pseudo-families, wives and the politics of relationships in women's prison

As of 2012, the percentage of incarcerated persons within the United States has increased 500% over the course of 30 years (The Sentencing Project, 2014). The United States has now surpassed countries like Russia and China and is home to the world's largest population of incarcerated people (over 2.2 million) (The Sentencing Project, 2014). While the prison industrial complex has led to a massive increase in incarceration in general, women are the fastest growing population within the United States' prison system (The Sentencing Project, 2014). As a result of this increasing rate of incarcerated women, academics and practitioners alike have begun to show interest in the experiences of this population, sought to understand their unique social positions, and tried to make sense of how these positions impact their relationships during incarceration. Many scholars have scrutinized coping mechanisms in which incarcerated women engage and have specifically focused on sexual dyads and pseudo-families (also known as play families) and, to a lesser extent, informal kinship networks (see Kruttschnitt, Gartner, & Miller, 2000). One area that has garnered little attention in the literature is the importance of gender reconstruction within the confines of the prison.

Numerous studies indicate that men and women differ in their responses to incarceration (Bosworth, 1999; Giallombardo, 1966; Greer, 2000; Maeve, 1999; Severance, 2005a, 2005b; Sykes, 1958; Ward & Kassebaum, 1965). While incarcerated men tend to be more independent, female inmates tend to engage in more relational behaviour with one another (DeBell, 2001), specifically by creating pseudo-families and sexual dyads. There is some disagreement in the literature regarding the proportion of women who engage in pseudo-families and sexual relationships in prison. The proportion of women who engage in pseudo-families ranges from 30-70% (MacKenzie, Robinson, & Campbell, 1989; Propper, 1982). While Huggins, Capeheart, and Newman,

(2006) and Propper (1982) found that the number of women who engage in lesbian relationships during their incarceration is significantly lower than those who engage in pseudo-families. The literature regarding relationships among incarcerated women suggests that membership within a pseudo-family is more common than involvement in an intimate relationship with another inmate. It may, however, be difficult to ascertain accurately the proportion of incarcerated women involved in lesbian relationships due to the discomfort that some women may feel about disclosing information about their sexuality, especially if they identify as heterosexual outside of prison (Severance, 2005).

Previous research suggests that engagement in pseudo-families is a means for coping with the stress of incarceration and subsequent separation from their families (Gagnon & Simon, 1968; Kruttschnitt et al., 2000; Propper, 1978; Severance, 2004). These women adapt and adjust to their new environment in order to create a livable experience. In her study, Giallombardo found that the structure of pseudo-families closely mirrored that of families in society at large and served similar functions: a sense of belonging, love and affection, and protection. As such, she argued that pseudo-families serve a pro-social role within the prison and help minimize behavioural infractions due to conflict. Huggins et al. (2006) suggested that while pseudo-families do have positive effects on the female inmates and provide them with emotional support, affection, and love, membership it also “increases the likelihood that one will be involved in an adverse event” (p. 125).

Research indicates that incarcerated women do, at lower rates, engage in sexual relationships with one another in order to find love and emotional support (Giallombardo, 1966; Jones, 1993; Severance, 2005), social support (Severance, 2005), and for economic reasons (Greer, 2000). While some studies suggest that women engage in these relationships because they are deprived of heterosexual relationships during the course of their incarceration (see Gagnon & Simon, 1968; Watterson, 1996), Jones (1993) argues that sex and expression of sexuality are less important than the aforementioned factors in these relationships. At this time it is unclear whether women, who enter prison identifying as heterosexual and then engage in lesbian relationships, continue to engage in these types of relationships post-incarceration (Foster, 1975; Severance, 2005). Other researchers conjecture that women engage in lesbian

relationships during their incarceration as a means of adaptation and coping with their new environment, but return to heterosexual relationships upon their release (see Ward & Kassebaum, 1964).

Many researchers have focused on pseudo-families and sexual dyads as two means for adaptation, or coping, among incarcerated women. However, there has been little information about how women use these strategies and others to resist systemic constraints and express themselves as active agents. In her ethnographic study on the adaptation strategies of incarcerated women in England, Bosworth (1999) found that her participants paradoxically employed traditional notions of femininity in order to undermine the gendered barriers that constrained them. While she did not focus on pseudo-families or sexual dyads, Bosworth found that the women in her study used traditional hegemonic beliefs about women's roles and femininity in order to maintain some sense of control over their bodies, circumstances, and environment. In other words, through their corporal and discursive practices, these women actively succeeded in destabilizing hegemonic discourse surrounding traditional notions of femininity and identity performance. She took a Foucauldian stance and argued that repetitive acts of resistance can and do enable change (p. 130). Thus, she suggested that despite the restrictions incarcerated women face, they are not entirely disempowered because they are constantly negotiating and renegotiating power.

Prison is undeniably an oppressive institution that depends upon surveillance and coercive control in order to regulate behaviour and minimize institutional infractions. Such coercive policies are intended to suppress inmates' identities (Severance, 2005) and force them to conform to desired behaviour that benefits the institution and those who maintain it. While prison may act as a totalizing institution responsible for simultaneously punishing and regulating behavioural and identity performance for the duration of an inmate's incarceration, the confines that it creates mirror, to some extent, the socio-structural constraints that regulate identity performance within society at large. Operating within these constraints, women must learn to adapt to their new environment and conditions to which they might not otherwise be exposed (i.e., being in close confines with women of different races and ethnicities, having to abide by rules that regulate how they can conduct themselves, and being told when to eat, sleep, and

work). However, it is fallacious to assume that these women's identities are entirely constrained by their incarceration because some quickly learn how to perform a meaningful identity within the prison which affords them the ability to form relationships and negotiate power.

Queer theorists cite the importance of temporality and spatiality in the (re)construction of identity. Halberstam (1998), for example, discusses how androgynous women are accustomed to performing their gender one way in public but must embrace a different, more feminine identity when they cross the threshold of a women's bathroom in order to avoid being ridiculed for being in the wrong bathroom. While actively engaging in this identity shift when crossing spatial boundaries may act as a protective factor, it suggests that individuals are capable of, and indeed often do, perform gender in order to adapt to their surroundings; yet these women remain constrained by gendered expectations placed upon them by the larger social environment. Constraining is the notion that in order to know how to behave in each context, individuals can only work within socially intelligible definitions of subjectivity (Hale, 1997). Similarly, incarcerated women perform their gendered and sexual roles within the confines of what is socially understood as being possible: masculinity and femininity. I will argue that the very structures that constrain women within society and in prison (i.e., race, class, gender, and sexuality) simultaneously facilitate the ways in which these women reconstruct their socio-spatially relevant identities as well as how they create discursive space for the emergence of a (constrained) agency in the performance of gender and sexuality. In addition, I will show how these women engage in a unique set of prison politics in order to construct insider and outsider status among one another within the confines of prison.

The Importance of Space and Interaction in Women's Prison

Of the 24 women interviewed for this study, 15 admitted to having spent time in jail or state or federal correctional institutions in California. These women offered insight into prison life and explained the complexities involved in doing time. Consistent with previous literature, the data revealed that gang activity was not as prevalent in women's prisons as in men's, as women have different socially and contextually relevant mechanisms for coping with incarceration (Bosworth, 1999; Giallombardo, 1966; Greer,

2000; Maeve, 1999; Severance, 2005; Sykes, 1958; Ward & Kassebaum, 1965). The data further revealed that, while women tend to express similar motivations for engaging in interpersonal relationships such as dyads and pseudo-families, the process by which they become involved in and ways they perform their roles varies substantially. Natalie summed up the findings when she stated, “in men’s prisons it’s racial. The Southsiders stick with the Southsiders. The Northerners (like Northern California) stick together. The Blacks. The Whites. It’s all about race. But in female [prisons] it’s just about who you bond with. It’s whoever welcomes you in and I got welcomed in...”

When the women who were interviewed for the current study entered prison their worlds were thrown into chaos because they no longer resided within the geographical confines of their neighbourhood, nor were they able to interact with their familiar homies and homegirls. Instead, they were confined in an artificial environment where they were forced to interact with women from various gangs, neighbourhoods, and regions of the state. In other words, a woman who claimed membership to Maravilla would likely find herself confined to a space with few other members of that gang but rather members of her rival gang, the 18th Street gang for instance. Even though these two groups were rivals “on the streets,” they still represented “13” which means they represented Sur (or Southern California). In other words, they identified themselves as “Sureñas”. When the women first entered jail or prison the first division that they reportedly made was racial (i.e., Chicanas and Latinas gravitated toward one another). Next, they grouped themselves based upon locality. Finally, I found that rather than splinter into territorially-based units, which reflected divisions on the street, women tended to create interpersonal units that took the form of families and/or dyads that reconstructed hetero-normative relational patterns during the course of their incarceration.

Racially and Spatially-based Organizing and the Controversial Role of Politicking in Women’s Prisons

While some participants denied the presence of politics in women’s prisons by stating that politicking only occurred in men’s prisons, others stated that politics dictated every aspect of prison life, from racial divisions to rules regarding behaviour when engaging in kinship and sexual relationships. Prison politics, then, can be understood as

a means of negotiating power, legitimizing individual and group identity, and getting one's needs met in prison. The participants who denied the presence of politics in women's prison were clear about the fact that incarcerated women did not fight for their rights like their male counterparts and, as such, failed to "get stuff done." They contrasted their inability to politick with incarcerated men who united and took initiative to accomplish certain tasks that benefited them collectively, as a racial group.

AK: What about women? Do politics happen for women in prison?

Delilah: No. That's why girls don't get their rights in prison. That's why guys get treated a little bit better than the girls. Girls get treated bad in prison because the girls don't stick together and stick up for their self and go for their rights and follow the politics stuff.

Delilah's reference to "the politics stuff" is indicative of the ways in which incarcerated men form large, racially-based groups in order to command power and respect. Prison politics for men involve the amalgamation of various racially-based gangs into one large, racially homogeneous group. Women, on the other hand, segregate themselves based on race but do not tend to dominate various aspects of prison life in large groups. Instead, as previously mentioned, they tend to form families and sexual dyads.

Natalie echoed Delilah's statement and reported that men's and women's organizational style in prison is quite different, something that affects women's experiences during their incarceration: "It's not as organized or anything as you hear about the guys prisons....Yeah, in men's prisons it's racial." She suggested that less emphasis on gang activity by race in women's prisons meant that incarcerated women were less organized than men. For example, several participants reported that politics were racially motivated, and thus were commonly employed in the men's prisons. Women, they argued, did not engage in politics because they did not form large, powerful groups which enabled them to accomplish specific tasks such as "calling shots" on the streets and arranging for drugs to be brought into the prison. As one participant stated: "women don't stand for nothing." Similarly, in her work, Bosworth (1999) found that inmates complained that women "don't stand for anything important" (p. 140), which strongly implied that women did not unite to work towards a common goal. When asked

about this, Marissa offered insight into the differences between politics in men's and women's prisons:

Marissa: I guess it could probably just be how the guys established their thing, you know? They did it over power; to have power. And we didn't have that...We aren't as organized as the men are. We didn't think about beyond; we just think about how our living situation is at that moment, who's around us. I think we think about that the most. Like how to make our situation better in that moment living with us and the guys are not looking at who's living with you; they're looking at other stuff. They're looking at this is how much work in a day; this is how we're gonna do this; this is how we're gonna take over this; this is how we gonna run this. We're not thinking about running anything; we're just thinking about then and there and how we are in that moment. I think that could be the difference. I'm not sure.

Marissa's analysis of gender-based differences in politicking reflects the general consensus of the women interviewed: men possess more power than women on the streets and in prison. Power originates with "shotcallers" (or, gang leaders) in prisons who execute orders to be carried out both in prison and on the streets. Because women in gangs, in prison, and in the larger social environment are traditionally recognized as being less powerful than men, the data suggest that politicking for incarcerated women takes a different form, one that dictates and regulates women's relationships with one another rather than every day "happenings" in prison and on the streets.

I found that women who served time in prison consistently referred to the idea that men "got things done" in prison, whereas women simply "created drama." This idea, however, was not unique to the prison environment. Hegemonic discourse dictates that women represent emotion and passion while men represent logic and reason (Bock, 2005). Women's identities have traditionally been constructed through their role of mother, wife, and caretaker—domestic roles that are enacted within the home. Relegation to the domestic sphere has denied women a voice and, subsequently power, within the political sphere because their roles have not been recognized as legitimate (Bock, 2005). Bock argues that men, on the other hand, have constructed themselves as independent, goal-oriented providers. Because their legitimacy has been defined and established by them and maintained through their work outside of the home or within the political sphere, men have traditionally retained and simultaneously executed power.

This power has thus become institutionalized and has served to reinforce men's legitimacy within the larger social sphere. In other words, men's roles are legitimized because they are seen as "do-ers." Both men and women are socialized by the binary constructs of man/woman which is implicit in the construction and performance of masculinity/femininity (see Butler, 1990; Risman, 2004, 2009). These constructs, then, serve as schemas that dictate how individuals understand and differentiate the roles that each sex is supposed to play.

Based upon our socialized understanding of gender roles and our tendency to ascribe specific attributes to the sexed body (man/woman), it makes sense that women enter prison with these same gendered beliefs about the ways in which men and women are expected to behave. As such, women who have a history of incarceration often bring with them traditional beliefs that women do not retain power and, as such, are less effective at getting their needs met. Ironically, the women in this study indicated that they felt more powerful and more effective in getting their needs met when they joined a play family or engaged in relationships with a girlfriend or "wife." This suggests that while participating in a familial or dyadic relationship paradoxically reinforces traditional representations of femininity, it also allows women to construct an identity within that relational unit that affords them a sense of power and control. In other words, these women have become active agents who use femininity to re-construct a kinship network as well as their own identity within that network. Despite the power that women reported gaining through membership to a kinship network, they nevertheless compared themselves and the ways in which they organized themselves to their male counterparts.

While some of the participants denied that racial separation constituted politicking in women's prisons, others argued that this separation as well as general expectations and the subtle nuances of engaging in relationships constituted politicking, or engaging in prison politics. Interestingly, when asked, many of the women were unable to define the word "politics," yet they were able to identify and describe the nature of politicking on the streets and, more importantly, in a correctional setting. Destiny succinctly stated that "when you go to prison it's just like black sticks together, brown sticks together, white sticks together. It's all about colour; it's not even about the gangs

no more. Now that's called 'politicking.'" Desiree agreed that politics in women's prisons were racially based:

I'm gonna say maybe [there are politics in prison]. I think those are politics. I'm gonna say yeah. I can't say politics because I think those are just rules that are just set, and they have been set decades, and they just follow those rules. And I think they are different for each nationality whether it's Latinos, whether it's Asian, whether it's Black, all different types of races. I think they just follow this rule that's been passed down to people. Passed down. Passed down. At the end it's just the same thing, you know. They do the same thing, you know. They hang around; they segregate. Everybody is like Latin, Black, Whites, *Chinitos* [Chinese]. You know everybody is segregated, which I don't understand because you have to interact with people but definitely there is segregation. One-hundred percent segregation in jail, you know.

Her reference to the South Side suggests the importance of a self-imposed racial and spatial separation between individuals when they enter prison. On one hand, all Latino/a inmates are expected to connect whether or not they are of Mexican descent. However, individuals from other parts of the state are incarcerated in the same prison; Latina inmates from Northern California (Norteñas) are expected to stay together, whereas Sureñas stick with one another. Alma agreed with the racial and spatial basis to as well.

Politics is basically just the word that they use in the pen. The big homies, they come out and they tell you, "politics." Politics is mostly about race. But when you going to jail... When you go into the penitentiary... There's politics involved which is that you have to go to the South Side, to *raza* [Mexican race]. You have to go kick it with your *raza*. It doesn't matter what you're from. It does not matter. You are Mexican. Latino. You have to be with your race. And if you're not with your race then they'll kill you. Simple as that. That's the politics.

In contrast to men's prisons in the State of California, in which men from each racial group are relegated to different cell blocks, Desiree explained that women do, in fact, segregate themselves but are forced to interact with one another each day within

their cell blocks.³⁰ Once women separate themselves from one another based on racial and geographical locality, they further create groups based upon traditional, nuclear familial dynamics and heteronormative dyadic relationships. Politics in women's prison are recognized as anything from racial separation, to creation of interpersonal relationships such as pseudo-families and sexual dyads, to specific rules involved in either type of relationship.

“Ride or Die for Your Blood”: Politicking and Playing Family

I think maybe the purpose was... For me it's like, I think when people do that it's just so they can get a bigger crowd. Bigger protection. Feel like you got a lot of people on your side. Like, 'oh that's my family.'
(Destiny)

Many participants reported that entering prison for the first time was an overwhelming experience that invoked fear, both of the unknown and of the potential for victimization, and loneliness. As such, some women found solace by becoming a member of a play family for protection and as a distraction from being separated from their own families. Participants' understanding of play family membership varied from “fun,” and “protection,” to “being part of something,” and the dynamics of these families tended to reflect those of traditional nuclear families. Typically the role of matriarch, or “play mom,” was assumed by an older, “lifer,” or inmate serving a life sentence, while her more masculine partner adopted the role of “play dad.” Women who served long portions of their sentence were often looked up to by younger inmates who were in need of basic necessities such as commissary, protection, and navigating chaotic prison dynamics. Maria shared her experience of becoming part of a play family during her incarceration:

Well, it's usually the older person; it's the mom. They're always the older ladies that are, like, more like mother figures, and they see us -- 'cuz I was 19 when I went in prison, you know. And to them, that's a baby. And they're like, “Oh my god, what are you doing in here? You're a baby!” So then automatically, I'm her baby. So I'm her kid,

³⁰ See: <http://www.propublica.org/article/are-california-prisons-punishing-inmates-based-on-race>; <http://newsmine.org/content.php?ol=security/prison-incarceration/racial-segregation-continues-in-california-prisons.txt>

right, and she's my mom, my play mom. And if she has a girlfriend, her girlfriend is my play dad. And if she has any other kids, then they're my sisters. You know that's just how it works. So, it's usually the older ladies that are considered the moms, or like the aunts, you know. And then there are the older, older ladies that are like pushing 70, 60, they're grandmas, you know. It's the same thing that would play out here in the real world; it's just inside.

As Giallombardo (1966) demonstrated in her study, the dynamics of play families closely resemble those of nuclear and extended families, or perhaps more accurately, traditional notions of how families should look. Interestingly, many of the women who participated in the current study came from single-parent homes in which family members were not as cohesive as they were in prison. Participants' biological mothers often were forced to take on the role of nurturer and provider in the absence of their children's fathers. During these interviews, however, none of the participants described single-parent play families that closely resembled their own biological families. When play children were incorporated into a play family or they made a connection with a lifer and her partner, it was the decision of the play mom and play dad to allow the newcomer into their network.

While play moms tended to be more feminine in appearance and took on the role of nurturer, women who assumed the male role in a dyad (i.e., play dad) were often more masculine in appearance (e.g., short or no hair, binding of breasts, or, even in some cases, had facial hair) and affect (i.e., they engage in more traditionally masculine behaviours).³¹ Kimberly, a self-described "aggressive," or more masculine woman, discussed her role as a play dad:

Kimberly: So I was the papa; I am the more aggressive, right, and my partner was the mom.

AK: [your] Lifer partner?

Kimberly: Umm hmm. And then we had [names of their play children]. And there were two little boys – they were considered little boys and the baby was the girl. The responsibility was to take care of them. You know, they're younger, and when they first get there you

³¹ Gendered roles within interpersonal dyads will be discussed in greater depth later in this chapter.

try to take them under your wing and tell them the dos and don'ts and 'don't get caught up, and if you get caught up that I got you.' And if they didn't have nothing I had to make sure that they had at least their hygiene to wash up and stuff like that. That was my responsibility, the role that I took on. They didn't have no clothes. Like, one of them nobody took care of them, so you would buy a pair of pants for two cigarettes and just make sure that they were okay [as though] they were really your kids.

AK: How did you get into that role of taking on that responsibility?

Kimberly: Actually, it's them. They start hanging out with you, and they see you as a couple. "This is our pops." Sure. But it's kind of like you already have taken because they are in your circle, and they're little, and you just want to protect them; they just want to be loved, too, once again. Right?

When asked how she and her partner took on the role of parents and became the heads of their family, Kimberly stated that their roles evolved naturally through the needs of their play kids. Play parents (who may or may not have already established a play family³²) assumed the role of protector and provider for their younger counterparts. According to the participants, play families naturally evolved from mentor-mentee relationships to ones of love and true concern for one another's well-being. Like Kimberly, Marissa said that her relationship with her play parents developed as a result of the shift in dynamics:

AK: How did they become your mom and dad?

Marissa: I guess, since I was younger and there were things that I didn't know about people, they would kind of explain to me...they'd guide me. They'd be like, "Oh, oh, stay away from those girls, she's no good for you; she's gonna get you caught up." And they started looking out for me. I didn't have somebody to take care of me, my family wasn't there for me, so they'll be there for me, you know. Whenever I needed a shampoo they'd be like, "Here, we got you" and they'd shoot it to me or whatnot. Like, I called them my mom and dad because they'd look out for me.

³² While some of the participants stated that their play families were already established when they entered prison, others said that they were an integral part of the formation of their family once they started referring to their play mom and "mom." Angel suggested that that play families are established based on "several people just grow[ing] a bond together."

AK: At what point did you start calling them mom and dad? Or did they ask you?

Marissa: No, 'cuz one time the girl one, she called me up... she told me something. I was gonna go do something, and she yelled at me, but she didn't yell at me too scary like she was tryna check me or nothin' crazy like that, but more like... it seemed motherly to me the way she yelled at me like, "Don't you do that." And I went, "Okay mom, I won't do it." And it just became a joke. I was just like, "You act like you're my mom or something." And she was like, "Probably I should be." And I was like, "Alright." It was the thing you do in there; you make families. Not like the guys. So I made my family like that. That was my mom and dad. I called her mom after that. That was her boyfriend so that was my dad.

Like traditional families, play families often provided material and emotional support for one another. However, some of the women stated that they came from broken or dysfunctional families where they did not receive the love and support that one might consider part of typical family dynamics. Despite not receiving love and support from her own family, Michelle suggested that she found these qualities in her play family. She equated the dynamics of her play family to that of a real family even though she was not personally familiar with these dynamics. "You give a lot of loyalty and love still, you know, and you find yourself doing anything for them. So it's not too many differences.... You're going to get treated like your real family." Despite being unaccustomed to positive family dynamics, Marissa and Michelle had an understanding of what aspects their families lacked once they became part of their play families and were actively able to engage in something they saw as positive and distinctive during their incarceration.

Playful recounted the positive social interactions and thrill she experienced during her incarcerations in the LA county jail. Like others, Playful experienced jail as a reprieve from her daily street life. Each incarceration allowed her a chance to get sober, something she was unable to do on her own in the streets because of the lifestyle she lived. Jail was also a place where she felt welcomed and accepted by others she met on the street and during her myriad incarcerations. She stated:

You go in and out of jail so much that you basically know everybody. You go in like if you're going into a party; that's how it becomes. [The other inmates] are like, "Hey wassup? Where you been? I haven't seen you in a long time. You were out for a long time." You just walk into

the place where there been a house and you bump into such and such and it's just a big old reunion.

Because Playful experienced significant problems with drug abuse and was left by her boyfriend, a prominent gang member, she was forced into homelessness and, subsequently, prostitution to support her lifestyle. While relationships in county jail and prison appeared to differ somewhat,³³ jail for Playful and other participants, was an opportunity to escape the hardships of the gang lifestyle and was a means to connect with people who accepted them despite their problems or their history.

While Joanna denied participation in a play family, she did offer insight into the dynamics of play families. She stated that many incarcerated women, like her, either did not have a family or strong family connections. The loneliness they felt growing up had an impact on the types of relationships they eventually formed. Like the rest of the participants, Joanna joined a gang because she wanted to feel a sense of belonging and to be a part of something. Scholars have suggested that gang affiliation does have some benefits for young men and women such as allowing them to feel part of something (Miller, 2001) important and develop an identity as "being someone." The gang, then, often fills the role of family and protector and provides young men and women with an outlet in which to express themselves, something they likely had not previously experienced. Once these women enter prison, they are torn away from the only family that they know and often experience the same feelings of loneliness, isolation, and fear that they felt prior to their affiliation with the gang. Prison families, then, help fill this void by providing these young women with the love, acceptance and support they believed they received from the gang. Joanna stated:

You got the mom and dad, which is two females; they're like the older ones. They're the ones that usually, like, adopt a child, you know, or a cousin or an auntie whatever it wants. I don't know, like, I used to not buy into none of that. Like, to me it used to get really annoying with

³³ This likely had to do with jail as a shorter-term experience. While play families and dyadic relationships did exist in jail, they were often short-lived and members did not have as much freedom to develop the same type of bond, as jail does not offer as much freedom for inmate interaction and, thus, bonding (prison inmates are typically subjected to 23-hour lockdown in jail because of extreme overcrowding and the fact that inmates of all risk classifications are often on the same cellblock or in the same dormitory).

stuff like that because I think I was so done with the whole street thing, and when I head on to prison I done it a lot out here, and when I was in [county jail] fighting for my case. I used to hear it all the time, but it's, yeah, I guess it's that acceptance stuff, wanting to fill that family. That make-believe family that we don't have, you know, the loneliness catches in, just wanting that support, having that group of people which you consider your family that no matter what they'll be there for you.

One of the most difficult aspects of incarceration for the women interviewed was that they were unable to regularly interact with their family and friends (if at all). Some women were not close with their families and thus did not have family members who visited them in prison. Others had family members who were heavily entrenched in gang life or other criminal endeavors and could not visit due to risk of arrest. In addition, most participants stated that few of their homeboys or homegirls visited them once they were arrested. Homies' loyalty and support, they argued, was conditional and limited to the streets. Arlene stated, "When you get busted nobody does shit for you. It's like they forget about you, like you don't even exist, and you get tired of that." Because many of the women found themselves isolated from their families and the people with whom they were accustomed to interacting on a daily basis, they were forced to forge new relationships to meet their emotional needs during their incarceration. While many of the relationships did not last post-incarceration, the women argued that the relationships they created provided them with a sense of comfort in their home away from home.

In addition to emotional support, play families also served to provide the women with protection in the face of aggressive or dangerous inmates. Some of the women indicated that asserting strength by fighting with other families and inmates led families to gain power and status within the prison. By all accounts, fighting in prison, similar to the streets, is commonplace because women, once again, have to prove themselves and show that they are not "punks." Natalie described why fighting is an important aspect of prison life: "You don't let nobody punk you when you're locked up. You can't let nobody punk you. You're gonna have to fight. You have to fight. It don't matter if you get put in the hole or not." If one or more inmates provoked another woman by insulting her or physically assaulting her, the victim of the attack was expected to fight back to show that she was not weak. Play families played an important role in protecting each other so that members were not deemed punks.

Marissa: To me [playing family] was more like fun when I started, but then after, it became more like a power trip. We started intimidating people, and they knew they couldn't fuck with us. Or, they learned that if they fucked with us they were going to have to fight all of us, and we were deep. We started making uncles, aunts; we had USOs [reference to a prison gang] which are the USOs behind us, a lot of people. So it became a big thing. And then we started intimidating other people and it became a power trip thing.

AK: So on one hand women in prison don't have the kind of power that men have in prison, but on the other hand you found a way to get power through your family?

Marissa: Yeah.

AK: So what was that like as your family started coming up in terms of power?

Marissa: It felt good because then I started getting more stuff to me. I started getting a little bit more organized about what I stole in the kitchen. I would make money like that with my family. I would bring stuff in, and they would help me fucking contribute, and even they brought stuff in. It was, like, I looked out for them, and they looked out for me. I looked out for them the way with stealing, so it became a good thing because we became bigger. I got more power. We felt like we could punk people, and nobody was gonna fuck with us. I felt more comfortable. I could say I could lay down now and not worry about if those girls are gonna only wanna keep fighting me because I have my family now, too. So wassup?

Belonging to a family not only afforded Marissa protection from the frequent violence that ensues within prison, but also boosted her status among other inmates. Use of physical force to defeat rivals and assert control gave Marissa and her family power within the prison. As one participant, Destiny, stated: "When I say power, it's like respect. Fear means respect. Respect means fear. Power is respect. Control." Similar to life on the streets, it is difficult for one individual to command absolute control, but working together as an organized group allows people to take command of territory and instill fear in others. In prison, inmates' ability to take control of physical space, such as the kitchen, means that they are in a position to steal food and contraband from the kitchen and sell it to other inmates for material and economic profit. While these women stated that when they arrived in prison they felt weak and fearful of the unknown and other inmates, they found that they were able to gain power and assert control through engagement with their play families.

Despite the fact that play families provide emotional support, protection, and boost inmate status by commanding control of certain spaces within the prison, they also create conflict (Foster, 1975; Watterson, 1996). Destiny argued that there were three things women should avoid when they enter prison: (1) drugs; (2) debts; and (3) relationships. She stated that getting involved with drugs, owing a debt, or engaging in relationships with other women (whether pseudo-families or sexual partners) meant that women were engaging in politics and placed them at risk for “drama.”

Destiny: They're called your play mom, play dad, play sister, your play kid. So for me, I really didn't like to do that 'cuz when you get play moms and play dads and play kids and all that you get caught up in more shit because [...] You ride or die for your blood, right? When it's your real family, you ride or die-- you're with them all the way. That's your blood, an' you're gonna stand behind them 100%. So when you're taking on that role in there, in prison, then that means whatever they come with 'n their packages you're gonna carry too. So for me I tried not to ever do that, but a lot of times people get so attached, an' they really tend to like a person, an' they just start calling you that on their own. And I'm not a mean person, so I never be like...ok, so I did have a play dad 'n a play sister you know? And it carried nothing but bullshit because I had to be fighting right there behind them too. Anytime they got into something, I'd be right there behind them, 'cuz I was like, 'That's my dad so I gotta be behind her helping her.' And it was stupid but... It was just crazy.

AK: What purpose did it serve to have play families?

Destiny: I think maybe the purpose was... For me it's, like, I think when people do that it's just so they can get a bigger crowd, bigger protection, feel like you got a lot of people on your side. Like, 'Oh that's my family.' People go really far with it. But for me, I didn't go really far with it because I didn't take it that serious as other people did because to me it's like these are supposed to be your play families and stuff, but trust me, in a heartbeat they'll turn around 'n backstab you. They will. It happened. So for me it was just a joke. I didn't even take that serious. But of course everybody wants somebody who's... They wanna make their crowd bigger. They want people who know how to fight on their team 'n stuff.

Destiny talked about the importance of standing behind one's family, but even though she acknowledged that getting “caught up” with play families led to “bullshit” and “drama,” she eventually became part of the play family. Interestingly, she equated her behaviour in the play family to the behaviour in which she would engage with her biological family if her family members were under attack. She suggested that it was

mandatory she fight for her play family in prison. Marissa and Natalie stated that there was reciprocity when it came to fighting in prison. Play family members protected them from violence, and they, in turn, were required to protect their family members. In fact, Natalie was willing to be placed in the Special Housing Unit (SHU, or solitary confinement) and vividly discussed serving three SHU terms for defending her play mom's honor on the yard:

So my prison mom said I reminded her of somebody or of her daughter something, and we just became really close, and she looked out for me. I went to the SHU because of her. Well, I didn't go to the SHU because of her, but I went to the hole because there was somebody on the yard that was snitching on her case, and so I took it into my hands to fuck her up. So I [got] put into SHU, which is the Special Housing Unit, and I got a SHU term. My first one was 65 days; my second one was another 60 days; and then my third one was for 30 days.

Some participants indicated that prison politics dictated that family members had to defend and protect one another, particularly the matriarch and patriarch, when one member of the family was attacked by another inmate. Families, then, became important in the physical wellbeing of each inmate involved because they supported one another during ritual prison conflict.

Destiny further stated that it was difficult to trust other women because even family members were quick to turn on one another. Destiny's lack of trust for her play family reflected the experiences of some of the other participants and was consistent with previous studies which argued that women in prison had difficulty establishing trust and knowing whom they can trust (Bosworth, 1999; Greer, 2000; Severance, 2005). Throughout the interviews, all participants made it clear that they "couldn't trust nobody." On the streets, women were wary of one another because, they argued, that women tended to "put your shit on blast," or, spread gossip throughout the hood and other neighbourhoods. In addition, the women soon realized that once they were arrested and sentenced to prison, their homies disappeared and did not maintain contact with them or support them financially or emotionally during the course of their incarceration. This situation forced them to turn to one another in order to have their needs met while in prison. Yet there still existed a sense of mistrust here. Participants traced this mistrust of

others in prison to mistrust of their homies who deserted them when they went to prison. One woman said of her play family, "... [T]o me it's like these are supposed to be your play families and stuff but trust me, in a heartbeat they'll turn around 'n backstab you. They will." Consistent with Severance's (2005) study, the women interviewed in this study suggested that there exists a contradiction among women when they go to prison: while women do not trust one another, they are inclined to forge relationships—even if they are seen as being unhealthy, or unfulfilling—in order meet their needs.

Veronica served five years in federal prison but reported that she did not engage in any interpersonal relationships, familial or sexual, with other women. In fact, she stated that play families were not as common as some women reported. However, she did argue that these families provided emotional support for their members, particularly the younger women:

It's really overrated the way it's talked about as opposed to being there, and living there, and having to deal with it on a daily basis. You get a lot of young girls, and they don't have moms, they don't have family, and they get close to somebody and they start calling the mom or like somebody will be like, "That's my kid." That's somebody that you're taking care of, or somebody that you're looking after, or they'll just be like, "That's my kid" because the woman has already established that much respect so that nobody messes with the youngsters. Things like that.

During her interview, Veronica indicated that some of the younger women in prison looked up to her as well as some of the older, more experienced women, particularly the women who had children on the streets and thus possessed "motherly instincts." She reported that, at times, the younger women looked up to her as a mother figure, but that she did not allow them to think of her in that way because she had her own children and did not want to become involved in a kinship network during her time in prison.

Similarly, Joanna rejected the idea of engaging in these networks during her time in prison, but noted that women who did choose to become members of play families did so in order to gain acceptance, feel a sense of belonging and avoid loneliness. In addition, she confirmed previous research findings that suggested women engaged in

pseudo-families in order to be part of a family that they may never have experienced before:

I don't know, like, I used to not buy into none of that. Like, to me, it used to get really annoying with stuff like that because I think I was so done with the whole street thing.... But, yeah, I guess it's that acceptance stuff ... wanting to fill that family. That make believe family that we don't have, you know. The loneliness catches in, just wanting that support, having that group of people which you consider your family that no matter what they'll be there for you.

On the streets, Joanna experienced a series of betrayals from her homies who had professed their loyalty to the members of the gang. Leading up to her arrest and subsequent incarceration, Joanna experienced the murder of her husband by one of her homeboys and was then "ratted out" by another homeboy for her participation in some of the gang's illegal activities. As a result of her experiences with members of her gang, Joanna quickly learned that she could not trust those closest to her despite the fact that they professed to be family. By the time she entered prison, Joanna had decided not to become part of a group, even if its members offered her support and protection during the course of her incarceration.

Like Joanna, many of the women in this study were skeptical of relationships in prison because of their tumultuous relationships and experiences on the streets with the very people who claimed to always have their backs. Despite their deep mistrust of other inmates, some of the women joined play families anyway. One woman who was involved in a play family, stated: "When I'm locked up I just stick to myself because you can't trust nobody being locked up. I don't give a fuck how close you get to somebody... You can't trust nobody being locked up." Huggins et al. (2006) found that while pseudo-families, as a group, did not increase the risk of adverse events for the correctional institution, "adverse events are more prevalent within family [which] may indicate that family group membership increases the likelihood that an inmate will experience more adverse events than nonmembers" (p. 133). In other words, individual members of the family may shoulder punishment for the family's actions, but the play family does not necessarily create more problems within the institution. The question that should be asked, then, is: how we might be able to create a prison environment where women can learn to foster healthy and mutually rewarding relationships?

When they enter prison, women are forced to exchange the comfort of their neighbourhoods and the familiarity of their relationships with friends and family for relationships with strangers and, possibly, women they considered to be rivals on the streets. Often these women embraced relationships with others within the prison environment as a means of coping with emotional and economic deprivation and protection as opposed to a desire to create long-lasting relationships which help foster trust in others. Despite their skepticism about trusting one another and knowledge that being part of a play family often invited a certain type of conflict, the women in this study reported that they (and others) sought a connection with other inmates in order to make their prison or jail time more bearable. While this study echoed the findings of previous research that suggested that play families invite conflict and might increase the likelihood of behavioural infractions within the prison, it also supports findings which suggested that kinship networks also provided a means of comfort, support, and interpersonal connection that these women might not otherwise have received during the course of their incarceration and, indeed, might not have ever received in their lives. More importantly, these women explained the innovative and dynamic nature of the group and, specifically, personal identity (re)construction within prison.

Some of the participants were unable to define the meaning of “politicking” while others denied the presence of politics in women’s prison. However, a number of women stated that women engaged in prison politics through their interpersonal relationships. Throughout this research, I came to understand four ways in which women engaged in play family politics:

1. Construction of, and engagement in, the play family itself was not only a means of survival and a coping mechanism but also a means of asserting agency. These women actively constructed kinship networks that mirror the nuclear family and traditional conceptions of what a family “should” look like. Consistent with Bosworth’s (1999) findings regarding motherhood, women who engaged in play families bought into traditional notions of femininity through family engagement, but they executed agency based on whom they allowed to join the family and how they chose to construct the family (i.e., number of members and whether or not the network contained non-nuclear, or extended members).
2. These families were often constructed based on race/ethnicity, a political statement that suggested other racial and ethnic groups could not understand the experiences and values of one another. Unlike Bosworth’s findings, racial membership was important for the women in this study. Bosworth surmised that

this was not the case in her study because of the clear class divisions that existed in Great Britain.

3. The use and maintenance of power and control was central to the well-being of the family. Families commanded respect from other kinship networks and thus exerted their power based upon the number of members within the family.
4. The more power a play family gains through size and use of force, the more sway they had in terms of control over certain spaces within the prison. Similar to the street politics involved in the control of certain territories, women in prison fought for and commanded control over different spaces within the prison.

Becoming a member of a play family within the isolating environment of prison simultaneously constrains and facilitates the construction of a new identity for incarcerated women. While it would be a mistake to suggest that play families are akin to street gangs, they do serve a similar purpose and have similar characteristics to gangs. Both quasi-institutions command loyalty from members and, in exchange, allow women, who find themselves marginalized and/or excluded by the larger social environment, a place to fit in and provide them with support and protection. Within these networks, members engage in a process of identity (re)construction by assuming and performing certain roles that are relevant within the specific context. Establishment of a family unit reinforces a sense of identity not only through an individual's performance of socially relevant role within the family but also through the exclusion of others who are not part of the family. In other words, each play family has the ability to dictate rules, norms, and expectations for the unit as a whole. Those who do not meet one family's criteria for membership (i.e., because of race or certain behaviours) are relegated to the status of "other," thus suggesting the exclusive nature of memberships and the reinforcing nature of the constitution of identity.

“Gay for the stay, straight at the gate”: The Politics of Prison Dyads

'Cuz a lot of girls ain't really gay. They don't really like girls but they go to prison and just wanna play that part. They don't really like girls, so they really don't want to be with a girl. They just really want the girl to do them. And a lot of times, too, the butchy one doesn't have money, and the feminine girl has a lot of money, so it's like pimping each other out. It's nothing like a guy's prison at all. Guys don't go and fight over homosexual stuff; girls fight over homosexual stuff! Guys go over there and fight over money. (Delilah)

The women in this study stated that in addition to forming play families, many incarcerated women became intimately involved with one another. Based on data obtained during these interviews, having a prison girlfriend appears to be a common practice among women during their incarceration, though some scholars deny this (see Huggins et al., 2006).³⁴ Whether or not they had a girlfriend during their incarceration, participants identified the various gendered titles and roles assumed by women involved in prison dyads. In addition to the enactment of their gendered roles, some participants noted that there are “politics” involved in dating while incarcerated. Despite prison being an artificial environment where people may step out of their street identity and engage in lesbian relationships, women simultaneously recreate heterosexual relational patterns. In order to better understand how politics dictate the nature of these relationships and how the relationships, in turn, simultaneously influence prison politics at large, it is important to understand how women ascribe gendered titles to themselves and one another. As I demonstrated in the preceding section of this chapter in the discussion of prison families, prison is an artificial environment where women are responsible for constructing and reconstructing gender, sexuality and their subsequent roles. In the following section I will argue further that incarceration may, in part, be responsible for the reconstruction or, at the very least, reconceptualization of sexuality and sexualized identity. In other words, heteronormative relational patterns are often reproduced within the confines of the prison in sexual relationships.

The social construction of sexuality is replicated within women’s prisons. Often there is a tendency to assign gendered labels to individuals whose sexuality falls outside of the heterosexual “norm.” That is, people attempt to understand individuals who do not engage in heterosexual relationships according to heterosexual standards in order to make sense of these behaviours. Gendered labels are often ascribed based upon an individual’s appearance. For example, “butch” is often used to describe a lesbian with more masculine features, whereas “femme” is reserved for women with a more feminine

³⁴ While data from other studies were collected within correctional facilities, these data were obtained from women who were no longer incarcerated, which may have an impact on the perception of how many women, in fact, engage in lesbian relationships. While many of the women in this study who had been incarcerated admitted to being intimately involved with at least one other inmate while in jail or prison, some of the women provided insight into these relationships but denied involvement in them.

appearance. Ironically, engaging in the practice of ascribing gendered and sexualized labels to better understand “what kind of lesbian” another woman is or “what type of gay” a man is, works to confine lesbians, gay men, and those who identify as “gay,” “lesbian,” or “queer” to a space that may or may not be applicable to or representative of them and fails to capture the totality of identity. In other words, engaging in this practice essentializes the existence of individuals who do not identify as heterosexual.

As is the case in the larger social environment, incarcerated women (both heterosexual and non-heterosexual) ascribe gendered and sexualized labels to women involved in lesbian relationships. Women involved in these relationships are then simultaneously responsible for acting out and, thus, reinforcing these labels. However, some scholars argue that identity performance is an iterative process that is in a constant state of constitution and reconstitution as a result of linguistic practices (see Butler, 1990, 2004). That is to say, it is impossible to determine which comes first - the way in which the body is inscribed by linguistic practices or the performance of corporeal practices themselves. In other words, corporeal practices exist and are reproduced because of the language used to describe them. However, discourse surrounding gender and sexuality is in a constant state of change as a result of corporeal performance. The way in which individuals constitute and reconstitute themselves, then, is intricately linked with gendered discourse describing and defining corporeal performance and making these two concepts mutually constitutive.

Participants described the different “types” of women involved in intimate relationships in prison. However, they acknowledged that while some women were ascribed gendered labels upon their prison entry as a result of their appearance and behaviour, others were responsible for constructing their identities and playing, or performing, their subsequent role during their time in prison, a phenomenon which will be discussed in greater detail in this chapter. All women agreed that there were at least three types of lesbians: (1) women who are defined as masculine in both appearance and behaviour (and who are often referred to as “he”), and are known as “stud-butches,” or simply “studs;” (2) women who appear to have some feminine physical characteristics such as long hair, but engage in more masculine behaviour, who are known as “aggressive femmes;” and finally, (3) women who are seen as feminine in appearance

and behaviour and referred to as “lipstick lesbians,” or “femmes.” The one exception to this tripartite classification system is the introduction of the title, “stem,” by Marissa:

We call those [masculine women] “studs.” And then we got the “stems,” and those are the girls that are tomboyish, but they’re like, girly, too. They could be girly, but they carry themselves very, like, more aggressive than girly girls. You know how girls are like, “Oh no” [flicks wrist and talks in high pitched voice]? There is a certain type of girl that doesn’t act manly at all where there will be girls that are real pretty but very aggressive like, “Ay, fo’ [fool] right here” and will be hitting each other, playing around more. You know there’s that type, the aggressive fem. That’s what we call them. “Stem” is more like, they look a little bit more boyish but they’re still girly. And then there’s the aggressive fem which looks more girly and is kind of like a boy; carries themself like a homeboy, like talks shit and they joke around like a boy a kind of.

Marissa enacted the differences in the various gendered roles performed by women in prison by changing the tone and pitch of her voice and through her corporal expressions (such as flicking of her wrist). Additionally, she used the terms “boy” and “girl” as reference points to help explain the gendered nature of these differences, thereby demonstrating the gendered confines of the larger social world that are mirrored within prison. Likewise, Destiny’s description of the different types of lesbians suggested that women were responsible for simultaneously constructing and enacting gendered labels. She talked about the various constructs as being representative, in part, of politicking:

Like I said, they have all these different rules, and when it comes to you being with a female you have all the different types of women. You have the women that are ‘dykes,’ some women that are ‘femme’, some women that are considered ‘aggressive femme.’ So like one of the rules would be if you’re involved in a relationship, you have a girl that’s a femme and a girl that’s a dyke. They’re in a relationship, and you have me, on the other hand, who’s an aggressive femme, and you know, my girlfriend’s an aggressive femme too. She’s not like a dyke. An aggressive femme is like a...you’re a girl, like that ‘femme’ side of you, but at the same time you’re aggressive. And the boys are the ones who are the dykes. They’re the ones that are just cut hair...don’t be with men at all. But aggressive femmes are bisexual. So what ends up happening is like a dyke can’t be talking to a femme. That would be a rule. Like a dyke is in a relationship over here [points to the side], tries to talk to a femme in a relationship over here [points to the other side] and automatically you’re violating code of conduct... a dyke’s not gonna be with a dyke...’cuz that’s both trying to be the man.

Interestingly, both women described how the various roles of women involved in prison relationships are discursively and corporeally constructed and, indeed, mutually constitutive. That is, the way in which one woman's identity was performed, interpreted, and understood was imperative in terms of her continued performance of that role and, subsequently the performance of her partner's role. In an article exploring the performance of gender and sexuality within the leatherdyke community, Hale (1997) described two roles: leatherboy and leatherdaddy. He argued that leatherboys' identity cannot exist as such without the existence of their leatherdaddies; that each identity was responsible for constituting the other. In other words, a leatherboy's identity was contingent upon his leatherdaddy; their gendered performance being one which was mutually agreed upon. Similarly, all relationships within the larger social environment relied upon the gendered performance of each person involved in the relationship; each person's role gave meaning not only to themselves, but to the other person(s) involved in the relationship. In prison women were then responsible for constructing and reconstructing their gendered and sexualized identities through performance and a series of interplays with their partner which subsequently led to defining and redefining rules for engaging in these relationships.

Construction and performance of these identities for the purpose of engaging in lesbian relationships is important to understand for two reasons. First, a number of women also stated that while many of the women in prison engage in lesbian relationships, they do not necessarily consider themselves lesbians on the streets. Second, construction and performance of these identities allows these women agency, which helps them to adapt and meet their needs. Consistent with previous literature, engaging in lesbian relationships is a way in which women adapt to the loneliness, experience and express love and sexuality in an isolating environment, and access necessities from commissary.

Natalie: There's people that go straight, and then when they go to prison they get a companion. It just depends on how much time you have. I've met people who were straight as fuck on the outs, and when they get locked up, they end up getting into a relationship. It's all just to pass time. All of it's just to pass time; all of it's just to take up time. If you have a relationship in prison, then you got somebody to talk to; you got somebody to fuck.... It's all about passing time. The majority of the time when you get on the outs that shit ain't gonna

last. The majority of the time the people that you meet locked up you'll lose connections with when you get outside because then life hits. Because in prison, that's our life. Our life is being inside these walls. Our life is not out there anymore. Our life is in here, so we gonna make best with what we've got in here....

AK: So what changes from the relationship on the inside to the relationship on the outside?

Natalie: Because you're out. You're free. You don't have to abide by jail rules. You can go back to your regular life, and if you want that person to be in your regular life then they will, but if not, you'll never see them again. It's two different worlds.

The idea that prison becomes these women's home suggests the uniqueness of the prison environment. These women leave the familiarity of the streets and must create a new home and lifestyle within the walls of the prison. Women may engage in these relationships as an adaptation technique in order to normalize their experience and help pass the time. While many of the participants suggest that engaging in lesbian relationships is situational and a means to endure the stress of prison life, Severance (2004) argued that the women in her study were confused by their relationships in prison and that they would have a long lasting impact on their sexuality, even post-release. Based on the data from this study, it seems as though women are more likely to engage in these sexual relationships as a means for companionship, entertainment, and support while in prison. The identity they construct, then, is one which is relationally, temporally and spatially relevant considering their circumstances.

Charlie and Natalie acknowledged that sex, too, can be a motivation to engage in lesbian relationships. When Natalie was asked about women's motivation to engage in lesbian relationships in prison, even if they identified as being heterosexual on the streets, she replied: "I don't know, maybe because they're horny. Some of them really care about each other. They have each other's backs." Nonetheless, all of the participants stated that it can be dangerous to trust one another in prison, but admitted that women often repress their feelings of mistrust in order to meet their emotional and sexual needs met:

I was with a couple of girls...and I think it comes from loneliness. People are lonely and people need attention, you know. People go through hard times in there. When you go through a hard time you

want someone to lean on. You want to lean on this friend. Next thing the girl thinks I must have feelings for her, you know, but in all reality you are going through emotional stress, and you need someone to be your support, and then it turns into something else you know... I didn't want to be by myself. I didn't want to be lonely. I didn't want to go through the hard time that I would go through if I was by myself... It really distracts you. Like, you know, because what I would do is I would get off; I would go to work. I had a job in the kitchen. And then I would steal food from the kitchen, and I would go to my unit. And I would make a slow lunch so I am all busy. Then I would get dressed for my partner and go outside and have a picnic. It made time fly by. If I wasn't in a relationship I would just go to work; go to my room; sit on my bunk. Not do nothin'. So it [the relationship] helped with time.

During her second interview, Michelle talked about the routines she created when she was involved in her multiple prison relationships. Everything she did during the day revolved around making plans to see and spend time with her girlfriend. Planning her next moves throughout the day helped her survive the monotony of prison life and pass the time. In addition, she was able to overcome her loneliness and feelings of isolation by engaging in relationships and focusing on her partner and the relationships rather than the time she had left on her sentence.

Though she denied being involved in any type of relationship in prison, Delilah presented insight into women's motivations to engage in relationships while incarcerated. She reported witnessing numerous sexual relationships between female inmates, something she referred to as an "orgy fest." Interestingly, Delilah pointed out a possible link between women being involved in gangs on the streets and later engaging in relationships during their time in prison. That link was trying to cope with pain.

AK: Why do you think it's so important that they have a girlfriend?

Delilah: Because they don't know how to be alone. People need to learn how to sit with themselves. Why couldn't we deal with her hurt in our pain? We ran to the streets, right? So we're still running to something when we're in prison.

AK: So it's always running to something or to someone in order to ...what?

Delilah: Feel safe. That's just everything that I've observed in all my prison trips and being in the neighbourhood and to prison and to the street.

As previously mentioned, participants consistently referenced the fact that they began to engage in gang activity in order to find a sense of belonging which they were either missing from home or because they were rejected by society in general.

Delilah: They're either already gay, or some just become gay. Like we have this thing we say... 'Gay for the stay and straight at the gates,' I think that goes. So that's funny to me 'cuz a lot of them do do that. Like, they have that thing like they need to be with somebody to take care of them, and a lot of them, usually girls that look like the manly looking, they go for the little skinny ones and kind of, like, you know, start turning them out ... liking girls. What's it called? And a lot of them they start liking it, and then that's when the drama goes on.

Through gang affiliation these women not only found a sense of belonging, but through this belonging were able to construct a sense of identity among others from similar social and cultural backgrounds. Delilah pointed out that when women entered prison, many of them were already dealing with trauma or pain from their lives on the streets, something they were able to mask through their affiliation with the gang. However, once they entered prison they exchanged one type of relationship (the gang) for a different type of relationship in order to distract them from their pain and suffering.

Women may engage in sexual relationships with one another in prison for different reasons, but it seems clear that being involved in these relationships helps women pass the time and provides them with a sense of emotional support. However, according to some participants, these relationships do not exist without certain rules, or politics. While some participants denied the involvement of politics in women's prison and their relationships in prison, others reported that the presence of politics dictated how women were supposed to behave in relationships. Destiny offered the most insight into the "politicking" involved in sexual relationships in a women's prison:

Most aggressive femmes have braids in their hair - long ponytails. A lot of aggressive femmes are the ones who are known—or boys, or the dykes—are known for putting their hair in a slicked back ponytail. It's normally the boys who do that - the dykes. But sometimes they'll have their head bald as well. Normally it's the aggressive femmes, like my girlfriend. She had a slicked back ponytail. And I was more femme than aggressive femme, so I had my hair down, or sometimes in a ponytail, but not trying to be a man. Aggressive femmes tried to play both sides sometimes. But for me it wasn't really like I was trying to be a man. I'm just aggressive, period. But always that tomboy kind of

look. Like one of the rules would be, I guess, nobody can braid your girlfriend's hair but you. [Laughing] If, um, somebody's braiding your girlfriend's hair, then be prepared to fight 'cuz that means she's 'tryna take your woman. And your girlfriend really shouldn't be buying anybody else anything from canteen or trying to take care of anybody else. That's just the way it is. It's real confusing.... You don't really want to be caught in anybody else's room. Like, if you're in a relationship with somebody, you really shouldn't be in anybody else's room. That's one of the rules as well. If you step into somebody else's 'house' that means this or that. You can't really be hanging around with other women either.

In addition to their gendered features, these women were expected to engage in specific roles that reaffirmed their gendered status and, subsequently, the gendered status of their partner. For example, Arlene described expectations involved in a relationship between a guy (butch-stud) and a girl (femme) in prison.

It's kind of like being out here [in the community]. If you're like a stud or whatever - if you're pretty much the guy in the relationship - you get anything you want like from all the girls that are in there. In there they cater to you. They do some way-out shit in there.

As these women demonstrated, lesbian relationships in prison not only meet women's emotional, physical, and financial needs, but they also largely mirror the gendered nature of relationships in the larger social environment. The traditional binary classification system that distinguishes "men" from "women" also exists within the prison. Men and women are expected to perform certain gendered roles which complement one another; roles that are mutually constitutive. In other words, the female/feminine cannot be performed without the existence of male/masculine performance. While these women do engage in politics in order to meet their own needs and are, thus, active agents within prison, they simultaneously perform their identities within the confines of highly gendered and sexualized systems which operate within the larger social environment and the prison itself.

Not all women were labelled and defined upon their entry into prison; some women were responsible for (re)constructing their gendered identity when they entered prison. As Natalie stated earlier, women who identified as heterosexual on the streets might engage in lesbian relationships in prison in order to get their needs met. However,

some participants argued that women were simultaneously responsible for the transformation in appearance and performance of their gendered identities when they stepped into their new environment.

Marissa: [My girlfriend] was an aggressive femme, too, but she was just more aggressive than I was.

AK: So there are different levels of aggression.

Marissa: Yeah. 'Cuz I wasn't as aggressive as her. She would just fight all the time. I was more chill. I'd be like, "I'ma cook something for us." I was more like... I'd try to make her feel more comfortable. I was just out there trying to... not make a home because you can't really make a home, but establish us; make sure she had everything she had, and I was out there getting it. Hustling. And she was doing it, too, because she was more like, different, I guess.

AK: [How] was she different attitude-wise than you?

Marissa: Me, I was more kick back. She was kick back, too, but she would get more angry fast. She would get angry fast, and she would just fight more. She was just more aggressive because she wouldn't want to wear tight pants; that's one thing she wouldn't do. She'd wear baggier shorts or baggier pants but... I would wear the tight pants. So that's why I would say that she was a little bit more aggressive than I was. It was just a little bit about how she carried herself.

Earlier in her interview, Marissa stated that she was a tomboy on the streets and engaged in delinquent behaviour in order to keep up with her homeboys and gain respect. She even acknowledged that she used to shave her head and wear men's clothes in order to identify with the guys and distance herself from the girls in the gang. As noted by her description of performing the more feminine role in her relationship, Marissa demonstrated that she transformed her identity once she entered prison.

Similarly, Charlie described how women actively transform their identities when they leave their street lives for prison:

Charlie: Some girls think they're men. Some of them could be prostitutes out here [on the street] but in there they're not. There are just a bunch of characters in there.

AK: So people can change their identities from street to prison?

Charlie: Yeah yeah, I've seen that. I seen girls who go in there and are prostitutes in the streets and in there they're gay. In there they are stud-broads. In the streets they are prostituting and stuff like that. They're all feminine. But when they get in there they're all stud-broads, they're all manly. Yeah, I've seen that. I'm very observant; I pay attention to a lot. I just don't say a lot but I see a lot.

Here, Charlie provided an example of the significance of temporality and spatiality in identity performance, an idea widely discussed in feminist and queer theory (see Butler, 1990, 2004; Halberstam, 1998; Hale, 1997). The concept that being one person on the streets and reconstituting that identity once a spatial threshold is crossed speaks to the fluidity of subjectivity. In other words, discussing identity markers such as race, class, gender, and sexuality as occurring along a continuum as opposed to being performed in socially, spatially, and temporally relevant spheres negates the possibility that these identities can and do intersect (Butler, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989).

Conceptualized this way, we can begin to understand incarcerated women as active agents who are responsible, at least in part, for negotiating their identities and relationships. As Charlie's example suggests, some women radically transform their identities when they walk through the prison gates. Prostitution is generally acknowledged to be a gendered occupation; women who work as prostitutes on the streets typically engage in emphasized femininity in order to earn money, often for the purpose of survival. Performing gender and sexuality in a specific way on the streets is functional and allows these women to meet certain needs. While prison confines them and immerses them in the politics involved in being incarcerated, once they enter through the gates these women transform themselves - perhaps to meet their needs in a different way which may be, in a sense, empowering.

Conclusion

While the data were obtained for the purpose of a larger study regarding identity (re)construction and performance among gang-affiliated Chicanas in the Los Angeles area, a majority of the women interviewed discussed their experiences in prison and the role these experiences played in their lives. A number of participants suggested that

engaging in relationships in prison, whether familial or dyadic, served a specific purpose for them. Interestingly, they cited similar reasons for participating in these prison relationships and in their gang-related relationships on the streets (i.e., loneliness, needing a sense of belonging and having material needs met.) Women in prison were responsible for (re)constructing their own identities while simultaneously playing a role in the (re)construction of one another's identity through their interactions with one another. Similar patterns were found in their lives on the streets.

The examples presented illustrate how gendered identity (and, though not explicitly discussed here, race and class) is inextricably linked to performance of sexuality and vice versa. The performance of gender and sexuality are mutually constitutive and has the potential to be highly agentic but will always occur within the confines of the larger social structures of gender and sexuality. In other words, while potentially agentic, the performance of gender and sexuality will always yield a constrained form of agency. The idea of a slight shift or radical transformation in identity through corporeal expression and/or within a relational context within the prison environment is what some of the participants referred to as being "gay for the stay and straight at the gates." While women engaged in these types of relationships may not be part of a "traditional" nuclear family or engage in lesbian relationships at any other time in their lives, they do construct a different identity upon entering prison through participation in a pseudo-family or dyadic relationship.

While these women engage in gender binaries, they are simultaneously responsible for (actively) recreating and redefining the meaning of these dichotomous roles. To one extent, then, these women reproduce heteronormative relational standards and make sense of their position within their relationships specifically, and prison in general. As in the larger social environment, gender and sexuality tend to be conflated and women who abide by heteronormative standards of engagement in prison are rewarded through inclusion in social networks.³⁵ Just as in gangs and other social networks, participants suggest that gendered hierarchies are constructed by women to

³⁵ On the other hand, it is important to note that some women do actively engage in heteronormative behaviour, but are excluded from different relationships because of their unwillingness to follow the rules, or engage in politics.

establish and exert power and control and subsequently regulate the behaviour of other women within the prison. Exertion of power through fighting and/or controlling the sale of contraband helps certain women establish legitimacy which reinforces their power and stronghold in the prison's social and political economy.

While many women engage in heteronormative relations, participants emphasized a unique identity that emerge within the prison setting that does not neatly fit within the traditional gender binary: the aggressive-femme. This role is performed differently from traditional male/female roles and is the amalgamation of both masculine and feminine corporeal and behavioural traits. The roles that women play in prison, whether they are part of a pseudo-family or dyad, are, in part, dictated by politics of the larger socio-structural environment as well as by the political ambience of the prison itself. Nevertheless, they simultaneously dictate the ways in which politics are understood and "institutionalized."

Some participants made the distinction between politics and rules; some suggested that the only politics that exist in women's prison involved racial separation, but that women do not actively engage in politicking because they were too weak to engage in a meaningful political system; others stated that all of the goings-on in prison are political in nature. Despite those contradictory opinions, everyone agreed that politics, as they described the term, originate in men's prisons; that men call the shots and that maintaining racial separation was the most significant aspect of politicking. While these politics are determined and practiced by incarcerated women, they are reinforced for men and women on the streets once men are released from prison, and are then adopted and reproduced within women's prisons. Some women suggested that certain families were involved in politics through their inclusion of certain individuals and subsequent exclusion of non-members. Finally, some of the women argued that politics occur on a more micro-level among women in lesbian relationships. In other words, rules exist within prison that dictate acceptable behaviour for each partner within the relationship. These rules, or perhaps politics, reflect gendered expectations that are partly reflective of larger gendered expectations regarding individual roles within a relationship and are partly reflective of rules developed within the confines of prison so that women can make sense of their roles and environment.

While there was significant variation in narratives regarding the role of politicking in prison, one thing seemed apparent: engagement in pseudo-families and lesbian relationships in prison is a political statement and is thus illustrative of a type of agency. The participants in this study traced their lives from the streets and their involvement in gangs to their experiences and the experiences of others in prison. Many of the reasons these women joined gangs were the same reasons cited in their engagement in relationships in prison (i.e., a sense of belonging, emotional support, and protection). It is clear that some women did, in part, reproduce heteronormative gendered, sexed and familial relations; however, if we are to understand agency as “the ability to negotiate power and to resist” (Bosworth, 1999, p. 130), then that concept - that they reconstructed families and established relationships in a new environment and, thus, reconstructed their identities to make their time more manageable - is agentic. It would be misguided to say that these women had full agency, but rather they were able to engage in a form of constrained agency. Despite being constrained by the socio-political and economic structures of the larger social world and the authoritarian rules and physical confines of the prison itself, these women were able to describe ways in which they paradoxically used the structural systems that constrained them and (re)constructed a meaningful identity during the course of their incarceration.

Some of the women interviewed for this study explained how they moved from being a member of a street gang to a member of a play family within prison. They suggested that they moved from street life in which there was no trust of others to prison life in which there was no trust of others either. This would imply that self-preservation is the most important factor in the dangerous worlds of the streets and prisons. Relationships are necessarily forged, but they do not necessarily represent mutually satisfying relationships in the “traditional” (emotional) sense. This raises an important question: How can professionals help foster mutually satisfying, safe relationships within prison? How can they help model “healthy” relationships so that women are not only physically safe but emotionally secure as well? Bosworth states that women in prison “wear a mask.” If these women are truly agentic, they are capable of rejecting both street and prison life and reconstituting their relationships and themselves – to be whomever they choose to be. This is a task, however, that is easier said than done.

Chapter 5. Exiting the Gang

You could do something else. You don't have to gang bang. You don't have to do all that. At the end of the day you gonna walk away from it if you can, if it's not too late. Sometimes it is. (Alma)

Introduction

While past and present gang research has focused largely on motives for gang entry and gang dynamics, little attention has been paid to individuals' experiences exiting the gang. Existing literature on gang desistance has been based largely on quantitative studies that describe a life-course trajectory and use longitudinal data (Decker, Pyrooz & Moule, 2014; Peterson, 2012; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, 2010). In addition, most of the data that have informed our knowledge of gang desistance over-represent the male experience; few studies have focused on female gang members. Some studies have suggested the importance of motherhood as an impetus for leaving the gang lifestyle (see Hunt, Mackenzie & Joe-Laidler, 2000; Hunt, Joe-Laidler, & MacKenzie, 2005; Miller, 2001; Moore, 1991; Moore & Hagedorn 1999, 1996), though leaving due to motherhood per se appears unclear at this time (Fishman, 1999; Hagedorn & Devitt, 1999). Still, many studies say nothing about the complex process involved in disengagement and its implications for identity (Decker et al., 2014), specifically identity transition and (re)construction among female members. Because our current understanding of gang exit strategies is based largely on male samples, it is problematic to assume that gang-affiliated females' experiences mirror those of their male counterparts (Chesney-Lind, 1988). Pyrooz and Decker (2011) and Vigil (1988) have argued that exiting the gang lifestyle is a process that is neither linear nor immediate. As such, this chapter expands upon this assertion and contributes to our understandings of the uniqueness of females' experiences exiting the gang lifestyle.

Quantitative research on desistance defines the term as “a termination in offending” (Pyrooz et al., 2010) and has uncovered some of the factors involved in gang desistance. Decker et al. (2014) suggested that there exists a “grey area” for gang members who have left the gang but maintain ties with it (p. 270). That is, there are a series of push/pull factors involved in the decision process to stay or disengage. Our current understandings of desistance have been derived primarily from longitudinal studies such as the Rochester Youth Development Study (RYDS) (Thornberry et al., 2003) and Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) (see, for example Peterson, 2012). For example, Peterson (2012) questioned young male and female gang members about their reasons for leaving the gang. She found that the majority of females (37%) left the gang because they “just felt like it” (p. 80); approximately 25% left because they made new friends; and 22% left because the gang lifestyle did not match their expectations. When asked how they left the gang, the majority of these young women (56%) said that they left with no consequences, while 18% stated that they were jumped-out, or incurred bodily harm in order to leave. Other studies on the gang exit experience have shown that no consequences were involved in the exit process (see Bolden, 2012; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Peterson, 2012), but that gang-affiliated youth tended to disengage in criminal activity once they matured (see Vigil, 1988). In addition, some findings have shown that gang-affiliated girls/women are significantly more likely to be exposed to violence, abuse and exploitation while in the gang than young women who are not gang-affiliated (Fleisher & Krienert, 2004; Miller, 2001). While quantitative research has focused on outcome measures such as desistance and has analysed variables that correlate with this outcome, qualitative research can contribute to this body of literature by explaining the process through which individuals desist. From a qualitative perspective, the phenomenon of gang exiting strategies requires further examination.

Quantitative research that has focused on desistance as an outcome measure (see Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; King, 2013; Maruna, 1997; Vaughan, 2007) has distinguished between primary and secondary desistance, and provided a

typology of gang desisters³⁶ (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Qualitative approaches, however, allow us to focus on the role of narrative in the reconstruction of new identities among secondary desisters (see King, 2013; Vaughan, 2007). King (2013) identifies three ways in which desistance narratives aid in the process of identity reconstruction: (1) they allow individuals to distance themselves from their pasts and potential harm that occurred while they were gang affiliated; (2) they may help the offender derive meaning from previous behaviour; and (3) they facilitate the construction of a new identity. Research on desistance through narrative, then, suggests that offenders are able to reconstruct a new identity in opposition to their criminogenic one, which facilitates their disengagement from a criminal lifestyle.

Gang researchers have long acknowledged that the process of desistance is neither simple nor easy to define (Vigil, 1988), and is an iterative and highly individualized process. There are, however, certain points that are important to take into account when attempting to understand the desistance process in general and for gang-affiliated individuals specifically. Individuals who desist from crime begin by questioning their old identities, thinking about and recognizing that which is possible and eventually eschewing their old behaviour (King, 2013). This does not, however, mean that individuals entirely reject or dissociate from their old identities. Rather, those identities become subsumed into and help inform their newly constructed ones.

Narrative enables the agent to reconcile discord with unity through positing the self as another. Through narrative, the agent is able to recognize his or her past as qualitatively different from present commitments yet cannot completely sever him or herself from it. Instead, these past events are recouped into a narrative that defines itself in terms of a shunning of previous habits and constancy to some future ideal self. (Vaughn, 2007, p. 391)

In fact, King (2013) critiques Giordano et al. (2002) and Paternoster & Bushway's (2009) assertion that the newly constructed identity must replace the original, offender identity in order for the (ex)offender to remain outside the criminal lifestyle. He argues

³⁶ King (2013) differentiates primary desistance, or “lulls in offending behaviour,” from secondary desistance, which he defines as “longer term maintenance of non-offending, accompanied by a change in identity.” (p. 48)

instead that some of their personality characteristics and behaviours may endure even after they have desisted. In other words, the core of one's identity does not simply disappear; prior experiences may continue to inform the newly developing worldview, desires, and decisions in the present and future.

In the current study I sought to describe and illuminate the disjointed paths that the women had to navigate in order to move away from their former lifestyle to a new identity that was consistent with their current values, beliefs, desires and circumstances. Because we cannot simply assume that previous gang desistance literature regarding males' experiences can be applied to women, it was important to employ a feminist framework in order to understand these women's ontological positions and truly understand the unique experiences of Chicanas in the process of exiting the gang and the gang lifestyle. Toward this end, the participants were asked to explain how they perceived their environments, major events in their lives, their social interactions, and themselves in relation to these experiences based upon their social positioning at various points in their lives. Their narratives reaffirmed that gang desistance for Chicanas is a process that takes time, is fluid, is highly dependent upon the individual and her perception of her experiences, and needs to be understood contextually and within a historical perspective.

“When You're Out, You're Not Really Out”: Transitional Identities

While most of the participants reported that they were no longer engaged in the gang lifestyle, it became apparent during the interviews that disengagement from the lifestyle did not necessarily mean that these women no longer identified, in part, as being a gang member or former gang member. In other words, many of the participants still saw themselves as continuing to somewhat embody a gang identity. Some of the participants made reference to the idea that they did not regret their past—and even embraced it—because it led them to the present. Vanessa stated that she was “proud of who I am. I'm proud of what I went through because if I wouldn't have went through it I wouldn't be here now.” Vanessa talked about her long history of gang affiliation, how it

was the only lifestyle she knew for many years, and how it was a struggle to forge a new identity for herself.

Alma argued that once a person was jumped-in and considered a homegirl, she would always be a part of the gang even if she was no longer gang-affiliated: "I mean I think you're always gonna be from it. You can say you're far away from it, but you always sit there and think about it..." Because she was so young when she entered the gang and left, it was unclear whether Alma was referring to always being known as a gang member or rather that she would always consider herself to be one, a distinction that other participants referred to as the difference between being "affiliated" or "associated." Natalie helped explain the difference between the two terms:

'Affiliated' is you're with us. If you're not jumped in, then you back us up. You throw up T [the gang sign representing her hood], just like, I'll throw up a T. You're affiliated: you kick it with us; you drink with us; you party with us; you have my back like I have yours. 'Associated' is you got family members. You're associated with the neighbourhood, not by choice; it's because you got family members, or you grew up there, but you don't kick it. You're associated by blood, not by choice. Or, you know about it, but you don't want to go that route [anymore].

Bolden (2012) discussed the differences between being gang affiliated and associated and how individuals who consider themselves to be associated (even though they no longer affiliate) remain part of the "gang landscape" (p. 215). Similarly, Pyrooz and Decker (2011) noted that "it is possible to leave one's gang and retain ties to the gang" (p. 423). Some individuals remain part of the gang because they continue to reside in the same neighbourhood or continue to associate with friends or family members who are still gang-affiliated (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). According to some of the participants, then, remaining associated with the gang demonstrates that they embody a gang identity even if they are no longer "doing gang" (Garot, 2010) or engaging in gang behaviour.

Natalie and others explained that there was a clear distinction between being affiliated and associated, though some of the other participants expanded the idea of "association" and argued that once a person was "from the hood," they would always be considered a homegirl, even if they chose to no longer affiliate and eventually moved

away. Destiny further explained the phenomenon of association, post gang-affiliation, and how this difference was implicated in and incorporated into one's transition in identity:

Destiny: Like, we grew up in that neighbourhood for so many years, and she [my mom] actually moved right before I went to prison. And for me, to this day, I don't live there, so it makes life easier. For me I feel like that's my past. That will always be me. My neighbourhood and everything that I have gone through, it's like that's me. That's what brought me to where I'm at today. That's my past. I embrace my past. So if somebody were to ask me, 'Hey, did you ever get out [of the gang]? Or 'Do you consider yourself out?' For me, I never got out. I just choose a different path now, and even my true friends, my homeboys, my homegirls, are gonna respect that or not. I'm not gonna go into hiding for nobody. I'm not gonna move far. People still know where I'm at. People still know who I am because it's that respect level.

AK: So it sounds like you're never really out. When you're out, you're not out?

Destiny: You're not. 'Cuz there's always going to be somebody who knows you, and that sees you. They don't know if you're out or not. Last thing they heard you were in. It's not a game where you're out or in from one day to the next. It's not like, 'Hey I got tired. I don't want to play no more.' No! They don't believe in that. You might as well just move away and never show your face, or you're considered a pussy. You're considered a bitch. A ranker. No good.

Destiny's explanation illustrates the importance of historicizing the various ways in which identity is temporally and spatially situated and how it is subsequently performed within the context of social interactions. While Destiny was clear that she was no longer gang-affiliated, or, participated in gang activity, she still recognized the importance of her past gang-affiliation. During the course of her interviews, Destiny was seven months pregnant with her first child and acknowledged the importance of providing her son with a safe lifestyle, one where he felt loved, accepted, and safe. She knew that if she continued to affiliate with her homeboys and homegirls, she would end up away from her son (either dead, in prison, or the child placed in foster care) and unable to provide him with the life she felt he deserved. Like most participants, Destiny recognized that remaining in the gang lifestyle led people to one of two fates - dead or in jail. Even though she moved away from her old neighbourhood and was able to geographically distance herself from the homeboys and homegirls, Destiny

acknowledged that she would always be a part of the gang because there would always be someone from her old lifestyle who would recognize her as being from the old neighbourhood. In other words, even if she no longer considered herself a homegirl, being a homegirl was an important part of her identity when she was gang-affiliated, and therefore it was something that she and others would recognize as a part of her being.

While some of the participants admitted that they no longer went to their hood to “kick it” with the homies and were beginning to meet new friends and engage in different lifestyle choices, others had reservations about leaving the lifestyle and their homeboys behind. Arlene admitted that she was having a difficult time negotiating her current situation with her gang identity:

Well, right now I’m not gonna lie. I’m kinda struggling. I still talk to a few of my good friends - those who I call my friends; those are who I rolled with. Me, I can’t just go and forget about them just because they’re from the gang. Regardless, I’m not gonna forget where I came from, and I still keep in contact. It’s just that now I’m not out there doing stupid shit like robbing people. I’ve got a job now - is just getting greedy to me. I’m not gonna go out there and rob someone with a weapon for \$10 when, fuck, I coulda made this in a hour at work. To me that’s just stupid.

Recognizing alternatives to gang activity such as gainful employment helped Arlene slowly begin to move away from the gang lifestyle. That lifestyle, however, still held important implications for Arlene’s identity - how she saw herself in the past and where she wanted to end up in the future.

While literature on secondary desistance, or “true” desistance from criminal lifestyle, suggests that an individual must completely disengage with the “offender” identity, King (2013) argues that this is difficult and may not be essential for a complete transition to a new lifestyle. He argues that “this level of consistency is highly unlikely when faced with the challenges of poverty, social exclusion, multiple disadvantage and substance misuse” (p. 153). In other words, it is likely that individuals will display ambivalence towards moving away from a lifestyle implicated in shaping their identities and world views. Despite disengaging from the gang lifestyle, many of the participants in this study continue to live in poverty, experience social exclusion because of their race, class, gender and former gang-affiliation, and they often live in disadvantaged

neighbourhoods. Though they made the choice to stop affiliating with the gang, they continue to be surrounded by the exclusionary social structures implicated in and associated with joining gangs in the first place. It is not surprising, then, that some of the women experience such ambivalence at the idea of complete disengagement from their gang.

Like Arlene, Natalie struggled with the idea of leaving the lifestyle and her homeboys behind. After she served time in prison, Natalie was placed on a civil gang injunction (CGI), forced to avoid local gang hangouts and avoid spending time with known gang members. Because she was legally required to disengage from the gang lifestyle, and threatened with further prison time if she did not comply, Natalie was denied the ability to make the decision to leave on her own and subsequently denied the experiential and cognitive process involved in an individual's decision to leave.

Some people, they don't grow out of it. Like I haven't grown out of it, but I'm not gonna be on the streets no more. I'm 25 years old, and there are people on the streets who were 16, 17 years old and I have no business being out there no more. If I'm not willing to get locked up, and I'm not willing to get high, then I have no reason for being on the streets because being on the streets you're gonna get locked up, and you're gonna get high. And I got a kid now.

Natalie admitted that she was not tired of gang life and that she still found it exhilarating even though she was no longer able to affiliate with her homeboys. During her interviews, Natalie cited four reasons for not being involved in the gang lifestyle anymore: (1) feeling as though she had grown out of it; (2) being placed on a CGI; (3) having spent time in prison and thus being away from her child; and (4) feeling the need to be a parent to her daughter. While she admitted that she was struggling with motherhood, Natalie felt that being a mother was the role she was supposed to play because it was no longer appropriate for her to run the streets at the age of 25. Despite this, Natalie continued to express her ambivalence about leaving the gang lifestyle to assume a role as mother and provider. During my third visit to Homeboy Industries, I asked a staff member if Natalie was still working at the organization and was told that she was no longer there. She had simply stopped coming one day.

“If this kid can see something in me, then I need to do something with myself”

Consistent with previous literature that suggests motherhood plays a significant role in young women leaving the gang lifestyle (Hunt, Mackenzie & Joe-Laidler, 2000; Hunt, Joe-Laidler, & Mackenzie, 2005; Miller, 2001; Moore, 1991; Moore & Hagedorn, 1996, 1999), many of the participants cited their current role as mothers as more important than their role as homegirls, even though this identification with motherhood took time. Often, when women become pregnant, they decrease the frequency they attend get-togethers and associate with their homeboys and homegirls (Hunt, Joe-Laidler, & MacKenzie, 2005). One participant stated that when she got pregnant at age 16, she “just stopped going....I stopped going because I was pregnant.” Though some of the participants were not mothers, the women who had children, including those who had children who were no longer in their custody, explained that becoming a mother was not necessarily an immediate incentive for leaving the gang, or at the very least, “kicking it” with their homies. While some of the women stated that their involvement with the gang slowed down during their pregnancy, they reported that they resumed gang activity shortly after they gave birth. Melissa, for example, reported that she still identified as a homegirl even after having three children but that she had stopped affiliating with the gang. During her first pregnancy, she began to decrease the time she spent with her homeboys and homegirls, but she still attended her gang’s get-togethers:

I would still go over there. Like they would have little barbecues or little parties that I would go. I would go just to show my face. But I was pregnant, so it's not like I can really do much. I would just go and hang out with them. Go to the car washes, the funerals, stuff like that.

A number of participants, however, reported that they continued to kick it with the homeboys and homegirls and used drugs and alcohol during their pregnancies which led to serious birth defects in their children and the death of one participant’s newborn.

Many participants, as a result of their involvement in gang activity and subsequent prison sentences, often lost custody of their children. Those who did not lose custody of their children during their incarceration left their children in the care of family members. Vanessa spent the majority of her teen and adult life affiliating with her

gang, placing herself in dangerous situations, and engaging in heavy drug use. As a result of her lifestyle, she decided to relinquish custody of her six children and left them in the care of family members who were not gang-affiliated and able to provide them with a safe and stable lifestyle. Interestingly, it was not until Vanessa was threatened with the permanent removal of her seventh child (then, an infant) by the Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) that she began to move away from the gang lifestyle and create a more stable life for herself so that she could care for her daughter.

AK: So what was the turning point? Was it the murder?

Vanessa: Yeah. That and when they tried to take my daughter. The murder... that scarred me for life, but I didn't even know those people. It was just crazy being there when it happened. It wasn't none of my homies. I don't know who it was. I don't even care who it was. That was one of my turning points. And then my other turning point was my baby getting taken away [by the] system. That was more of the turning point. When they're taking your kid away from you, and [your child is] yelling, 'Mom, Mom, Mom, I don't want to go with her. I don't know her,' it's ugly. You feel helpless. I just cry. But what's crying gonna do? I had to make myself strong for my boyfriend because he was bawling tears....Ever since they tried to take my baby away... That's my world....Just because I'm not doing drugs no more, and I'm not in a gang, and I've got my shit together doesn't mean I'm perfect. She's just my world...I left everything behind and it's just a whole different world for me now. I care now. I have feelings now. She's the one who keeps me going.

AK: So it was this kid that really turned your life around. This is your seventh, and I know that you felt a lot of guilt because of what happened with your other six. What was it about this particular child that changed things for you?

Vanessa: Because *they tried to take her* [my emphasis]. My other kids, my family took them in. They didn't take them from me. I gave them up. I'm the one that left. I'm the one that left them there. This one, they tried to take her away from me...

AK: So what was it about them trying to take her that made it so crucial for you to keep her?

Vanessa: Because I didn't want to go through the same shit that all these other girls went through, and are going through, and are struggling with. They don't even see their kids no more. I didn't want to not give a fuck because that's part of me. I can go see my other kids whenever I want to; however I want to. No matter how fucking twacked out I was, I [would go] to go see them. Her? I wouldn't have been able to. If I started not giving a fuck and let them take her, I

wouldn't ever see her again. It's not because I love her more than all my other kids. It's not even about that..

AK: It was about—for lack of a better word—having control over when you could see her?

Vanessa: Yeah. Like, how the fuck are they gonna take my kid away from me? That's my kid. Yeah, I have my other kids, and I love all my kids equally. It's like, how the fuck are they gonna take something away from me? That's mine.

While she had experienced significant traumatic events, such as the fatal stabbing of one of her homies during her period of gang affiliation, Vanessa remained ambivalent about changing her lifestyle. Even though she had six children, Vanessa was heavily involved in the gang lifestyle and heavily involved in her addiction. She acknowledged that she was unable to care for her children but stressed the significance of the fact that it was *her* decision to place them with her family members so that she knew where they were and could visit them when she was able. It was not until she had her seventh child and almost lost the ability to make the decision about where and how her daughter was raised that she decided to leave the lifestyle and seek help for her substance abuse. As Natalie also suggested, being able to make a decision about when and how one leaves the gang lifestyle plays an important role, especially for individuals who have such little control over their lives in the first place. Agentic expression, such as deciding how to live one's life and raise one's children, was important, particularly for women, because it allowed them some control over their lives.

Social and political exclusionary practices impact poor women of colour, in particular, and work to further marginalize their existence (Collins, 1994). That does not mean, however, that they do not push back against those systems which attempt to constrain them. As Vanessa explained, retaining control over decisions regarding motherhood was one way that these women were able to exert agency. While Vanessa was pressured by an external governmental agency to change her lifestyle, she also explained through her narrative how she was able to exert control and push back against the regulatory systems that were dictating her role as a parent. Vanessa completed the parenting and substance abuse courses that were required of her in order to regain custody of her daughter, but, for the first time in her life, she made the decision to

actively engage in the courses she was offered in order to take back control over her role as a mother. She has chosen to continue attending programming, including support groups, engage in pro-social activities like exercise groups, and has maintained her sobriety for over two years.

While some participants admitted to being neglectful and even causing harm to their children as a result of their addiction and their lifestyles, the social and geographical climate in which they were attempting to raise their children was not conducive to healthy child rearing. Participants who lost custody of their children reported deep regret regarding the negative impact of their decisions on their children. While participants took responsibility for their actions, they reported having limited access to resources (i.e., reproductive education, substance abuse prevention programs, afterschool programs to keep participants off the streets during their teenage years, early substance abuse intervention and treatment programs, and prenatal care). It seems then that these women had few opportunities to create a healthy child-rearing environment in the first place.

Participants reported feeling trapped within their barrio and subsequently in their lifestyle; there was little hope of leaving the barrio or lifestyle and few means to do so (see Kolb & Palys, 2012). Collins (1994) argues that poor mothers of colour face significantly different challenges than their white, middle-class counterparts. One of the struggles these women face is actually being able to maintain custody of their children in a world where parenting standards are established according to traditional white, middle-class notions of what constitutes a “good” or “bad” mother (p. 54). These notions not only dichotomize the capacity for women to mother their children, but also fail to contextualize and historicize the experiences of women of colour. They are then adopted and institutionalized by governmental agencies such as the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). Collins argues that these parent-regulating agencies are “designed to disempower individuals. [They form] the basis of a systematic effort to disempower racial ethnic communities” (p. 54). According to DCFS (2013) statistics, African American and Latino children are significantly more likely to be involved in the

child welfare system than Whites in Los Angeles County.³⁷ This climate of external organization involvement in people's, most often single mothers, parenting, fails to take into account that racial/ethnic minority mothers, specifically Latinas, may have different parenting styles that do not fit the traditional mold (Baker & Carson, 1999; Collins, 1994; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997). In other words, the problem regarding the regulation of minority parenting within the barrios appears to be cyclical: poor parents of colour who reside within certain areas are more likely to be subject to child removal because their parenting styles may not mirror those of the dominant culture. Devaluation of individuals as capable caretakers creates additional strain which may negatively impact their parenting styles when and if their children are returned to their custody.

Like some of the other participants, Nicole decided to leave the gang lifestyle and go to a rehabilitation center because her daughter, over whom she lost custody, was being raised by the child's father and his girlfriend. Nicole became gang affiliated at a young age and began using drugs and running the streets with her much-older boyfriend at the time. She was heavily involved in drug use when she became pregnant and did not know she was pregnant until she was well into her second trimester. Nicole's twins were born significantly underweight, and one infant died as a result of severe birth defects due to extreme pre-natal substance abuse. The death of her daughter and her belief that she was solely to blame was traumatic and played a major role in Nicole's relapse into substance abuse and life on the streets:

AK: How did you decide that it was time for rehab?

Nicole: I was just tired. I was tired of running. They wanted to send me to prison for 4 years. At this time my daughter was 5. My daughter didn't even know who I was; she was calling somebody else "Mom" the last time I'd seen her. And I blew up at my daughter's dad, and I said,

³⁷ According to DCFS' official statistics for 2013, 11.1% of the children involved with child welfare in Los Angeles County were white, whereas 25.9% of the children were African American and 59.6% were Latino.

(http://www.lacdcfs.org/aboutus/fact_sheet/DRS/May2014/Fact_Sheet.pdf). With respect to the demographic makeup of Los Angeles County in 2013, 28.5% of the population was White, 48.2% were Latino, and 8.6% were African American.

(<http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/epi/docs/2013-LAC-Population.pdf>).

These numbers suggest that whites are under-represented in child welfare system in LA, while African Americans and Latinos are both over-represented.

'How are you going to let her call this girl Mom?' And I was going to beat her up, but I stopped myself and said, 'Well, at least she cares enough about this woman to even call her Mom; at least she's getting that kind of attention that I'm not giving her.' It was that, and I didn't want to be separated from her anymore. My daughter was already getting older. She was beginning to understand things, and I didn't want her to grow up without her mom.

Like Vanessa, Nicole's daughter was not in her custody as a result of the choices Nicole made while she was affiliating with the gang. While she reported that she often thought about her daughter during her first five years, the idea that her daughter was being raised by someone whom she did not choose may have been more of a motivating factor for Nicole to make lifestyle changes so that she could become a real mother to her child.

While traditional discourse on mothering often labels women who abuse substances and engage in street life as "bad mothers," (Baker & Carson, 1999), we often fail to try to understand their experiences that have impacted their decisions. Rather than addressing the structural inequalities that are responsible for fostering the conditions that, in part, create these problems, it would be far more constructive to provide individuals residing in marginalized communities with preventative services (such as reproductive education, substance abuse education, and after-school programming) and resources to cope with the challenges of pregnancy and parenthood. Paradoxically, the participants explained how they exhibited a constrained form of agency by actively making the decision to become involved in their children's lives and, indeed, take steps necessary to become a stronger presence despite DCFS involvement. For example, when asked what motivated her to change, Desiree said, "[R]esponsibility. It wasn't just me by myself anymore. I had to take care of this little girl."

Delilah engaged in dangerous behaviour during her gang-affiliation. She reported that she was a well-respected homegirl and was in and out of prison for selling drugs and "putting in work" as an adult. Between prison terms, she had two children, both of whom were removed from her custody. While she was on the streets, Delilah was busy engaging in the gang lifestyle, and it was not until her son wrote her a letter during one of her prison terms that she realized she no longer wanted to engage in the lifestyle:

[The letter from my son] had a big impact on me because on one of my prison trips my kids' father (I have two kids)... On one of my prison trips I had a daughter who was a couple weeks old before I went back to prison, and my son was like, eight. Their dad got shot in the head, and he passed away while I was in prison, and I used to think... I used to blame myself for a lot of stuff, and I was really mad at myself.... I was never there for my kids. I was never a mother in their life, and I was used to tell myself, 'I'm not gonna be like my mom', but I ended up turning out to be worse than my mom. I was mean. I was mean to people; I hurt a lot of people and stuff like that. I hurt my children the most. So when this happened, I wasn't there for my son. I felt like, what kind of mother isn't there for her kid when their kid needs their mother the most? I used to blame myself for a lot, lot, lot of years. And then my son asked me like, 'Mom, can you go with me to see my dad?' And I used to be like, 'No.' I used to get all loaded and stuff like that, and I ended up just being loaded and going back to prison. And then my kids wanted to come and live with me and went to live with me for a short [time] until I ended up getting my house raided, and I went back to prison. The kids got taken away. And when I was in prison my son wrote me this letter. I can never forgive myself for not being there for my son when he needed me. I felt like my son needed me at that time the most, and I can never forgive myself for not being there for him. So my son wrote me this letter and he tells me, 'Mom, I love you. I want you to know that no matter what, you're the best mom ever. I'll always love you no matter what.' [He told me that] I was the best person in his world, and that I meant everything to him, and that he loves me and forgives me for everything. And, I'm thinking, 'How the hell can I be the best mom ever when I really wasn't ever there for him?' So I just kept reading that letter... thinking about life and thinking, 'How can this kid forgive me?' So that's what really changed my life... I felt like, dang, if this kid can see something in me then I need to do something with myself before I ended up killing myself.

The letter Delilah received from her son while she was in prison was the catalyst for her to change her life. While both of her children were still in foster care during the time of her interviews, Delilah reported that she was motivated to make positive changes in her lifestyle in order to regain custody of her daughter (her son was almost a legal adult and was going to college) and be a stronger presence in her children's lives. Because her children were older and were not involved in gang life, she did not need to convince them that there was more to life than gang-banging; she needed them to be proud of her and to show them that she could change her life course, accept responsibility for her past decisions, and to let them know that their lives were full of possibilities.

Many of the participants reported that having children was the major impetus in their lives to eventually “grow up.” Indeed motherhood has been cited as one of the strongest motivators for girls and women to decrease gang activity and make different lifestyle choices (Hunt, Joe-Laidler, & MacKenzie, 2005; Miller, 2001; Moore & Hagedorn, 1999; Taylor, 1993). For example, Maria was heavily involved in the gang and was a substance abuser. Interestingly, she reported that she identified as a lesbian, but she became pregnant one night when she was involved with her drug-dealer and under the influence of drugs. Maria did not realize she was pregnant until late into her pregnancy and harbored resentment towards her son initially because she did not want the responsibility of caring for him. Maria’s son remained in her mother’s custody for the first few years of his life while Maria continued to engage in the street lifestyle. After going in and out of prison and drug rehabilitation programs, Maria realized that she had a responsibility to care for her son. “My son needs a mom. He doesn’t deserve—like he didn’t ask to be made, you know. So, I just kind of take that into consideration. I didn’t have a bad life. Why should he?” Maria admitted that she still struggles with her role as a mother but that her son was her impetus to make changes in her life because she was getting too old to engage in the lifestyle.

While Alma did not have any children, she was very connected to her four year-old brother and reported being a strong presence in his life. Alma was kicked out of her mother’s home at the age of 15 due to her gang affiliation, but she always returned in order to bring her little brother gifts and give him the attention she felt her mother could not provide. Alma reported that she would often take her brother out with her in the streets but that exposing him to a shoot-out one day made her re-think her lifestyle.

One time there was a shoot-out, and he was with me. He was in the stroller. That was the scariest day of my life. I was so scared because that was my little boy. I was like, what if that little boy had gotten shot or something? What was I going to do? Since then I knew I have to change.

Alma expressed regret when she talked about taking her little brother with her into the streets so that she could hang out and buy drugs. After the shoot-out, she realized that if she wanted to be a positive presence in her little brother’s life, she was going to have to leave the lifestyle. Similarly, Angela realized that she was growing out

of the lifestyle after the death of her grandmother, which left her as the only other guardian for her son:

When my grandma died I started to grow up, and I started to realize that I was actually really alone in this world. I don't have any family. I'm alone. All I have now is my son, and I need to be there for my son because if something happens to me nobody's going to be there for my son. It made me realize that it was time to grow up, that that lifestyle wasn't getting me anywhere. I was either gonna end up dead or in jail.

“I just knew that I didn't want that lifestyle no more”

Before she was sentenced to prison, Marissa and her boyfriend committed breaking and entering crimes to support her and her children. Marissa had two children at a young age, but this did not initially deter her from continuing to engage in the gang lifestyle and “putting in work.” While she spent many years in and out of the Youth Authority,³⁸ Marissa did not begin to think about her goals or future until she was sentenced to prison as an adult. Spending time in prison not only made Marissa realize that she wanted to create a better life for her children, but it also forced her to engage with people from diverse backgrounds who exposed her to unfathomable possibilities:

Marissa: I guess I would say it was my kids that first started changing me. I mean I still went to jail, but the reason I felt like I went to jail was because I didn't know any other way. I did know that you could get a job, but it was just so hard for me because of my background to get a job. It was so hard for me to get a job, and I didn't feel confident enough to get a job. I felt like I was just too stupid to do a regular job. I don't know why I felt like that. So, that's why I didn't want to get a job before; I was scared to get a regular job. I guess when I was in there I kind of realized that everybody starts out like I did. We don't all know what you have to do when you get a job....You have to learn at the job. So I guess it changed; it's different. When you have your kids you feel like, 'Okay if you wanna do things right, you know, you gotta get a job, but that's something I had to do. I had to get a job to get a home...to get a stable home and all that.

AK: But it took going to jail first to...

³⁸ Youth Authority is a boot camp for delinquent youth.

Marissa: To prison. That's when it hit me the most because I remember me and my baby's father were stealing... Actually, I have two babies' dads. One of them's dead out of this; he's dead out of gang-banging. The other one is doing 32 years. So I went to jail, and I analysed and I thought about everything that happened to me, and I love my kids. I just thought about I'm either gonna end up dead or in prison just like my baby's dad. Who are my kids gonna have then? And I realized that there's more out of life than fighting for turf; there's more out of life than fighting every day 'cuz it gets tiring. It's tiring to be fighting all day and I want more out of life. I met people in there that have traveled the world, that are in there for white-collar crimes—and I would talk to them, and it would fascinate me; all that stuff that they go on cruises, and I'm like, 'Shit, I want to do that.' And to me, I've never been out like that. So I was like, man, there's so much shit out there that I don't know about that I want to do. So it just kind of motivated me....it was taking the time in the process. It was a learning experience from all aspects. It made me realize a lot of things. It made me learn about myself most of all—who I am. It made me more confident; it made me less scared of the world, 'cuz I knew that if I could face prison—if I could face all this—then why am I so scared to face the regular world? Why am I so scared? I realize my fears. I always felt that I wasn't good enough, and I still have that sometimes. I know that now. When I came to Homeboy it changed my life a lot because it shows me that there's more to life, and it's changed me and everything, so I'm learning a lot. I took the time to actually read and expanded my mind a little bit [because I had] remained stagnant and motionless. So it helped me.

As Marissa explained, exiting the gang was a complex process that involved many diverse experiences and exposure to a variety of people and events. She was not deterred from the lifestyle by her multiple arrests as a youth but rather by the various experiences she faced during her long, adult incarceration. Interestingly, Marissa had a girlfriend in prison and was part of a Latina pseudo-family, but her decision to leave the gang lifestyle, pursue gainful employment and ambitions was influenced by white, middle-class women who were serving time for white-collar crimes. These women exposed her to possibilities (more typical of the middle-class lifestyle) to which she had never before been exposed and which she could never have imagined had she stayed in the barrio. An individual like Marissa learned early that the only job for which someone like her was qualified for was going to be something illegal. She had no legitimate work history, so no one wanted to hire her. In such a case one most likely would go to prison and have a felony on her record, which would make her further unemployable. People

like Marissa never learned how to look for a job, where a job could be found, how to fill out an application, or how to create a resume and interview for employment.

Most middle-class adults her age have parents who have guided them or vocational counselors and programming in their schools that have provided them with these basic tools, but these women were not so fortunate. Coupled with no guidance, they further suffered from low self-esteem. Thus, the only motivational factor to change their life paths was because they had children. For Marissa and many others like her, it took going to prison and being away from their children to make a significant impact and try to change course. Furthermore, many women, like Marissa, got tired of fighting. She realized she wanted more out of life and learned from her interactions with wealthier women in prison that there was more out there for her, things to which she had never been exposed.

Joanna also cited incarceration as a turning point in her life. She was gang-affiliated for years prior to her incarceration, but was never heavily active. One of Joanna's homeboys snitched and falsely accused her of a crime that she did not commit; something for which she was arrested and incarcerated.

My turning point was actually when I landed in County [jail]. I just knew that I didn't want that lifestyle no more. Like I just wanted something different but not knowing how to have a whole different lifestyle, you know. This is what I already knew. Like this was all I knew to do.... I still associated with a lot of them.... Everything had changed, you know. We got a little bit older, stuff like that. Our mentalities was, like, leave it for the youngsters. That whole putting in work and all that that stopped for me when I turned 17, you know. But that's how when I got my case it was so hard for me, and that's when I felt really betrayal because of that. You know, like, I was already an adult, I was already in a different mind state.

As Joanna clearly explained, there was not one event that led these women from leaving the gang lifestyle. Many of the participants cited a number of experiences that led to them become disillusioned. For Joanna and others, growing up and realizing that gang lifestyle did not offer them what they originally thought it would was disheartening. Many participants reported that when they were in trouble, the homeboys and homegirls were not there for them. Joanna even reported that one of the homeboys "ratted" her out

to the police in order to avoid being arrested. These women eventually learned they could not trust anyone, especially those who professed to have their backs at all times.

Another frequent theme regarding exiting the gang was that the lifestyle was always changing with the addition of new (younger) homeboys and homegirls. This meant the dynamics of the gang were constantly in flux. Many reported that it became hard to “keep up” with the “youngsters.”

Many of the participants also reported becoming disillusioned by the lifestyle due to the youngsters’ differing ideas about acceptable gang behaviour. Some participants referenced a major change in retaliatory action as the presence of younger gang members increased. They stated that in the “old days” the honourable way to retaliate against an enemy for being disrespectful was to fight them physically or, in more extreme circumstances, confront them and shoot them directly in the head. This, they argued, was the respectful and dignified way of confronting an enemy’s transgression and sending a message to the rival gang. Now the method of choice was the drive-by shooting.³⁹ Chela reported that she was so traumatized by being an unsuspecting passenger involved in a drive-by, which was executed by her homeboys, that she decided to leave the lifestyle. “When we got out of the car I thought, fuck! What if we hurt someone? And then I knew that there was no way I could be a part of this. There’s no way. And that was the end of it.” The participants who discussed the change in retaliatory gang dynamics reported feelings of sadness and regret after being involved in drive-bys because they acknowledged the possibility of hurting innocent by-standers as opposed to just the intended target. As one participant disapprovingly stated: “Y’all niggas just do it because ya’ll do it. If you’re gonna do it, do it right because gang banging ain’t what it used to be.”

In addition to ever-changing gang-banging conduct, some of the women cited the influx of crystal meth as a major factor in changing gang dynamics. Drug use has always

³⁹ While this was one example provided by some of the older women about their experiences, most participants, young and older, were nostalgic for “the old days” and made reference to the past and the idea that the homeboys and homegirls, during the time they were active, were more respectable.

been a part of gang culture in the barrio. Moore (1991) reports that PCP became heavy presence in the community among cholos in the 1970s. Rodriguez (2005) reports the significant increase in drugs and arms on the streets during this decade, as many of the Pachucos of the 1940s—many of whom had been targeted by the police and incarcerated—returned to the streets as more sophisticated criminals. Ironically, the United States saw an increase in drug importation, and subsequently a flood of drugs on the streets, after Reagan announced his War on Drugs (Rodriguez, 2005). Crack cocaine was introduced to the streets in the '80s and cholos, though still involved with heroin and PCP use and distribution, began to incorporate this drug into their repertoire (Moore, 1991).

More recently, methamphetamine (commonly referred to as “crystal meth,” “queer juice,” and “speed”) was reported by participants and the community workers with whom I spoke to be the popular drug of choice among gang-affiliated Chicanos/as in Los Angeles. The participants in this study believed that the change in drug use on the streets was responsible for increased violence and change in gang dynamics and behaviour. For example, Little One was heavily active in the gang during the 1970s and 1980s when heroin, crack, and PCP were the drugs of choice in the barrio and for her as well. She noticed that when the homies began to move from the drugs of the '70s and '80s to meth, they began acting like “a fuckin’ bunch of animals.” Michelle also reported that the introduction of meth was responsible for the change in gang dynamics:

Meth changed a lot of stuff. A lot of people don't have respect for themselves or anyone else because they're too strung out on drugs. So, people's concepts and the things they believe in change over the years, and people have gotten more violent also because of the use of meth.

In fact, drug preference has changed continually throughout the past six decades in the barrio (Vigil, 2014, personal communication). This might indicate that each new generation of gang members introduces a new “wave” of drugs. While the participants in this study cited major changes in gang dynamics as a result of methamphetamine, historicizing the change in the type of drugs used (rather than drug use itself) and the dynamics relevant during each decade, it may be that these dynamics have always been in a state of flux throughout generations of those living in the barrio. Operating under this

notion, these women were comparing their “good old days” experiences to the present and were feeling a sense of nostalgia for a past they understood better. In addition, as they aged, they lost a part of who they thought themselves to be. They were developmentally different than when they entered the gang. This contributes to the literature by suggesting a natural aging-out process whereby women mature and realize they no longer fit in with the current gang culture.

Little by little everybody just went their own way

Most of the participants vacillated between leaving and remaining part of the gang, and they described the process of deciding to leave as being related to many complex factors and experiences. Interestingly, many of the women cited geographical relocation as being the primary factor involved in their ability to stay away from their neighbourhoods and their homeboys and homegirls. When asked how women typically left the lifestyle, one participant reported that “people normally move away... far. People normally just move. That's what I've always known.” While some of the women relocated because their families moved from their old “hood,” relocation for others was a strategic move to ensure they would not be tempted to re-engage in the lifestyle. Leaving the neighbourhood in which they were born and raised presented challenges for some because now they not only had to navigate new geographical space, but also had to negotiate new interpersonal relationships within new communities:

AK: So at what point did you stop affiliating with the gang?

Delilah: When I came here to Homeboy [in 2011], I don't go to my neighbourhood and I don't really talk to anybody. For two years I didn't have no friends. I had to get a whole new set of friends.

AK: How did you do that?

Delilah: When I started figuring out who I was, and what I wanted in my life, and what my interests were, I started figuring out that I liked theatre. When I went back to school and when I started working I met people doing social justice work. I met people at other agencies doing other work that had similar interests as me.

AK: So once you met these people, and you were able to find your new interests, would it be safe to say that that made it easier for you to leave the gang and leave your comfort zone for something else?

Delilah: Yes. It was hard in the beginning because I knew I wanted something different.

After Delilah was released from prison and introduced to Homeboy Industries, she took advantage of the programs they offered and was exposed to different life options. However, the transition from her former lifestyle to prison and from prison to a new neighbourhood and a supportive organization, made Delilah question and re-evaluate herself and what she wanted for her future. Likewise, Veronica began to question her role as a mother and her future during her long prison sentence. Acknowledging the myriad traumatic events she experienced forced Veronica to make difficult decisions; to move from her neighbourhood and spend less time with her family. She reported that her transition was particularly difficult because her family was still very active in gang life. While she was raised in a tight-knit family, Veronica discussed the challenges inherent in negotiating her identity as a loyal family member, influential gang member and a mother who wanted to expose her children to a different lifestyle.

AK: You still have some of those same [street] values...or those same thoughts. So how do you adapt to this new life that you're talking about?

Veronica: It's just so hard. I think because my struggle is that I just want better. I want to be able to give [to] my kids...that's my motivation. And, I want to be able to show them proper ways of living. I don't want them to ever have to resort to criminal activity because they can't get something or to turn to the wrong people in a time of need because they have me and they have family.... My family's like, 'You've changed so much.' I'm like, 'It's not that; it's just that I've grown.' Nobody was really there for me when I went to prison. I didn't get mail. I mean, my family took care of me. I took care of myself there... whichever ways I could make money I did....I can't break that connection. I can't. I tried. Now the only thing that I do is that I don't live their lives. I can't. I can't carry what they're going through because I need to do me. I'm tryin' to do me. I want my kids to be me, how I am today. I don't ever want them to experience what I went through. I want them to be strong; I want them to be open; I want them to be honest; I want them to be the thing that I am, that I've always had inside of me. I just don't want them to make the choices that I've made.... And it hurts me to keep my kids away from my family because I want them to experience the love. Like, my family's very loving. We are a huge family, and I love everything about them, but as far as taking it now, if you step out of the house in the streets.... I don't want my kids to be exposed to that.

A variety of factors led Veronica to the decision that she needed to leave the gang lifestyle in order to provide a better life for her children. She talked about the difficulty of escaping “street mentality” and that she sometimes faltered when faced with challenges. There have been times since leaving the lifestyle that Veronica has reacted, or thought about reacting, to an experience the way in which she was accustomed for many years. She stated that when this happened, she had to remind herself about how far she had come in life both mentally and emotionally and that her present and future lay in doing what was appropriate and in the best interests of her children. At the same time, she realized that her homies were not there for her when she went to prison. While her parents did send money for her commissary they were unable to visit her in prison because of their high profile gang affiliation, many of whose members were serving time along with Veronica in the same prison. Veronica also realized that her homeboys were not there for her, as they did not visit her. It was clear that Veronica was deeply impacted by her relationship with her family members and appeared uncomfortable with their assertion that she had changed drastically. She went into prison as one person and was in the process of changing her thinking and behaviour. This presented problems for her family because they did not understand this transformation. It was difficult for Veronica to understand it herself. She no longer, in some ways, appeared to “fit in” and was having difficulty reconciling this war within herself. In addition, Veronica was still in the process of negotiating how to allow her family to have a relationship with her children and not negatively impact their lives.

Other participants echoed these sentiments as well. They acknowledged that they had to move away from their neighbourhoods in order to maintain their new identities which were still fragile. Geographical relocation was positive for many of the participants because it meant that they were able to leave the dangers involved in the lifestyle, create more hopeful futures, and provide a new and safer life for their children. According to one participant, “Now that I have moved, like, I’ve been living at this other place for the past four months, and it’s been great. Like, I don’t have to worry with that, like, how I say that? Like, Oh, who am I gonna bump into today?” Moving away from the neighbourhood allowed this young woman to avoid her homeboys once she was released from prison and regained custody of her children. Encountering their former homies was referenced by many participants as a factor for re-engaging in the lifestyle.

Kimberly spoke about the pull to return to the neighbourhood, her homeboys and the lifestyle after each incarceration:

And I'm blessed to be alive today. I haven't been to my neighbourhood.... This was the last time.... I paroled in 2010, and I haven't been back since. And I won't because I know that every time I step back into my neighbourhood it's like, 'Oh you're back...' And they're happy to see me. 'You look good! Man. Where you been?' [And I say], 'in prison! I've been in prison!' Nobody cares when you're over there except for the homegirls that are there to receive you. Then [the homeboys say], 'Here's a sack. Go and take care of yourself.' And for me, there's nothing to take care of. I'm not gonna make money because I have an addiction and then that's it....[In order to leave the lifestyle] it has taken the geographical. I never took anybody to my house because I know.

As a recovering crack addict and formerly active gang member, Kimberly realized that her homeboys did not “have her back” as they originally assured her. Like other participants, Kimberly was abandoned by her homeboys each time she was sentenced to jail or prison. It was not until she returned to her neighbourhood upon release from prison that her homeboys acknowledged her absence and return. Likewise, many of the participants acknowledged that their homeboys would often try to pull them back into the lifestyle by proposing that they sell drugs in order to make money and subsequently make a profit for the gang. Kimberly realized what both she and her homeboys knew - that once she had any drugs in her possession, she was likely to start using again and would likely remain connected to the gang. As a result, Kimberly realized that she had to actively avoid her neighbourhood and homeboys in order to maintain sobriety and lead a different lifestyle.

Serving time in prison was cited as being an important factor in terms of leaving the gang lifestyle for three reasons. First, spending time in prison created a physical and geographical boundary between the women and their homeboys which had important implications because it gave them time to contemplate their lives on the streets and make decisions about where they saw themselves in the future. It was not until they were incarcerated that the participants realized that they had been abandoned by their homeboys, who reportedly did not write, visit or send money for commissary. Arlene

explained that she began to re-evaluate her lifestyle when she went to prison because she was neglected by her homeboys:

When you get busted nobody does shit for you. It's like they forget about you – like you don't even exist, and you get tired of that. Once you come out of it they're like, 'Hey, we were looking for you.' [But they don't even care about you] when you're in jail.

Likewise, once Syria was released from prison she decided to avoid the neighbourhood and her homeboys. She reported that her homeboys did not visit or write her while she was in prison. However, once she was released they began to show an interest in her once again and encouraged her to return to the neighbourhood. She decided to move to a different community and stated: "I stay away. They call me; I don't answer."

The second way in which prison has important implications in terms of exiting the gang lifestyle had to do with where the women ended up post-release. Some women's probation or parole conditions stipulated that they spend a designated amount of time in a halfway home or recovery house, often located in different communities. Michelle described the cyclical process of habitual incarceration and subsequent release to a residential treatment facility in the community. Through this process of maintaining her distance from the neighbourhood and her homeboys, Michelle came to realize that the lifestyle did not offer her everything that she had originally thought it did and she slowly disengaged from the lifestyle:

Going in and out of prison. When you go in and out of prison you wind up away from your neighbourhood because you are out of the scene for a little while. Most people, when they get out, they go back to their neighbourhoods. I would go out and go to a drug program outside of the neighbourhood, and I would learn about myself, and I would go back. I kept removing myself and putting myself into treatment. And this last time I removed myself. I went to another city, and that's what worked for me.

Third and finally, some gang-affiliated individuals' conditions upon release from prison stipulated that they would be placed on a CGI. Despite questions of constitutionality (see Myers, 2008), CGIs were one means for compelling some of the women to stay away from their neighbourhoods, from other known gang members, and

to avoid gang-related activities such as “throwing up” (flashing gang signs) and wearing gang-related colours. While some of the participants on CGI reported avoiding these facets of gang life, most had only recently exited gang life, making it difficult to know how effective the CGI was in the long-term. For example, Natalie—who was ambivalent about giving up the lifestyle and contact with her homies—stated that she continued to kick it with her homeboys once in a while despite the CGI; however, she avoided doing this at their old hangout.

While there have been mixed results about the effectiveness of the ever-popular execution of CGIs (Hennigan & Sloane, 2013), there has been increasing evidence suggesting that CGIs are generally ineffective in disrupting gang violence in the long-term. While gang injunctions appear to have immediate community-based effects, such as fewer incidences of reported gang violence, they are not effective at decreasing gang presence or violence in the long term (Maxson et al., 2005). As suggested by the participants, one major challenge involved in exiting the gang life is disassociating from those with whom one shares common experiences, a common identity, and shares numerous experiences.

Through her analysis of longitudinal data from the Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) project,⁴⁰ Peterson (2012) found that the “blood in, blood out” tactic for gang exit was not as common as some researchers have suggested. Despite many of the participants’ experiences that support this concept, it was more common that they simply left the gang by moving to a new neighbourhood. Some research conducted with gang-affiliated Chicanos/as show that leaving the gang is not as simple as it may appear (see Harris, 1994; Vigil, 1988). Harris (2004), for example, observed that some of the more entrenched female members of the gangs that she studied were subject to being “jumped out.” On the one hand, she found that women who were considered “fringe members” and, therefore, not as enmeshed in the gang (p. 299) were more likely to simply walk away from the lifestyle. On the other hand, Harris acknowledged that girls tended to age out of the gang in their late-teens due to

⁴⁰ For comprehensive evaluations of the GREAT program and its outcomes, see Esbensen & Osgood (1999); Esbensen, Freng, Taylor, Peterson, & Osgood (2002); Esbensen et al., (2011); Peterson & Esbensen (2004a).

pregnancy, incarceration, natural maturing out, and increasing drug use (p. 300). Though the participants in this study gave reasons for leaving the gang that echo Harris' findings, they also reported that it was often not simply one of these factors but rather the amalgamation of numerous factors.

Laura, a Chicana whose family had ties with an influential Mexican prison gang and was formerly associated with the Crips (an African American gang), shared her observation as both an insider and an outsider and denied that jumping-out was a typical practice within Chicano gangs.

No, no. This is the thing with a lot of people, and this is the thing with Mexican gangs—there's no such thing as getting jumped out. Once you're in a hood, you're in a hood, period. If you get jumped out and go to another neighbourhood, you're gonna get killed if they catch you...The only "out" is in a casket and everybody knows that. You get what I'm saying? So if somebody tells you that, it's a bunch of bullshit. Even for Mexican gangs that's not true.

While leaving the neighbourhood and joining a gang in a rival neighbourhood would be a punishable infraction, leaving the neighbourhood itself and ceasing to affiliate was the typical way of "exiting." However, Laura echoed other participants' statements that even when a formerly affiliated member leaves the neighbourhood, she was still considered a member of that gang. In other words, whether or not one ceases one's involvement with the gang, one will never lose that identity.

"They carried me when I was on my knees"

Many of the women simultaneously acknowledged their limited opportunities and the inequalities they faced though they still took responsibility for their decision to join the gang. These women demonstrated that making a decision to exit the gang and then following through with their decision was a process that involved vacillating between wanting to stay and wanting to leave.

One common theme regarding the decision to leave revolved around the need for supportive services and people. During the interviews, the women acknowledged that

one of the reasons they joined gangs was because they were looking for a sense of belonging and acceptance but also because they had few other options in their neighbourhood. There were few, if any, community centres, after school programs, or sports teams to occupy neighbourhood residents and divert them from the streets. With limited exposure to recreational or cultural outlets (typically associated with White, middle-class experiences), these women were never given the opportunity to explore alternative options or lifestyles. Exposure to alternatives to gang membership and the street lifestyle, these women argued, was important because, had they had it, they could have explored their skills and capabilities, used them productively, and avoided much of the trauma associated with street life.

When asked what young women needed in order to avoid gang life, Joana said: "I think people giving out more opportunities." Little One, who was in her 50s and had recently begun to reflect upon her past, was the most vocal participant. According to Little One, there were few opportunities for children to explore academic, cultural, or recreational opportunities within or outside of their neighbourhood. She talked fondly about the community park located on the outskirts of the housing projects but then reported that the city of Los Angeles: "want[s] to tear down Hazard Park to create more space for USC campus. They also want to sell the community gym to the YMCA... That's ours! We don't know who it's gonna be run by. We will run 'em out.... We see people treating our kids mean.... That shit's gonna stop."

Little One acknowledged the disparities between the opportunities presented to children and families residing in the housing projects within the barrio and those of children growing up in privileged areas in West Los Angeles. The children in her community, she reported, have few opportunities, limited resources, and few arenas through which they can express themselves, which necessarily leads to boredom and kids hanging out with others with similar experiences (see Moore, 1991; Vigil, 1988). She attributed the City tearing down the park and converting the community gym to a YMCA as taking away the few outlets where the children within her community could congregate and simultaneously taking away collective community agency to make decisions about the "goings-on" in their neighbourhoods. On one hand, she reported that community members were protective of their children and maintaining control over the

few outlets the community offered its children, but on the other hand, many of the children who grow up in those particular housing projects ended up joining gangs - a seeming contradiction.

Like Little One, some of the women addressed the idea that children within their communities could benefit more from the city and other organizations working with community members in order to discover their perceptions of their own needs rather than dictating what resources should or should not be allocated. Little One referenced the limited opportunities in the barrio and the impact this had, and continues to have, on community members. She explained how her community was “like a jungle. It’s just magnetic. Once you’re there, you’re stuck.” Desiree echoed Little One’s sentiments: “...And some people are just stuck there. They don’t know any better. That’s all they know - how to survive in a ghetto, how to sell dope. That’s having poor values. You know what I mean.” Interestingly, Desiree acknowledged that these young women were often not exposed to another way of life but rather attributed their resulting behaviour as simply having poor values.

Some of the participants acknowledged that gang-affiliated Chicanas face unique issues and need specific services to address these issues. Charlie, Delilah, Diane, and Kimberly, for example, argued that young, gang-affiliated women tended to suffer from low self-esteem as a result of childhood abuse and being “used” by men in their lives, both in their homes and on the streets. Consequently they were able to articulate the link between abuse, promiscuity and subsequent motherhood at a young age, and substance abuse. They were particularly adamant that women needed an outlet in which they could talk to someone or be part of a supportive group with other young women who experienced similar circumstances.

Diane: I was a person that I COULD NOT, I COULD NOT talk. I was so scared to talk. I was so intimidated because I was taught not to talk because of my relationship with my marriage. It was so abusive that I had no voice; I had no choice; I had nothing; so I could never express my feelings. And because now that I have therapy, I am learning how to express myself. I am learning how to let out my pain because a lot of my pain was just put away. You suffer; you suck it up; and, ok, whatever...and that’s bad for us. It’s bad to keep it in our hearts because that’s how we accumulate resentment and hatred towards people; towards the whole world.

Marissa acknowledged how the correctional system failed to address young women's needs and suggested that providing education and other rehabilitative measures for these women would be more effective than punitive measures:

So if you put in all these people - and we're already all fucked up, traumatized - a lot of us grew up in a fucked up situation or whatnot, and you're just throwing us in there and keeping us away from the family, you're not doing nothing else but hurting us. You're not making anything to improve our lifestyle, to improve us. There is no therapists in there -somebody that could help you figure out what's wrong with you... hit it from the root.

Marginalized women, such as those in this study, are often traumatized from their experiences in their homes and from life on the streets, and they rarely received preventative services, intervention and rehabilitative treatment (including skills training and education). Because of limited community-based resources, many of the women were not aware of how to locate them and receive necessary services during crucial formative periods in their lives. When asked what types of supportive services they thought women needed in order to avoid gang life or to cease affiliating with gangs, participants were vocal about allocating more community-based resources and providing rehabilitative services in prison and the community:

Kimberly: More outreach in the community... More homes. More of the help that is out here that can be mailed or something into the institutions. Maybe if people go into the institutions and let us know about the programs that are out here because we really don't get none of that. I mean, we have NA and AA... that goes in there, but it's not the same like, 'Hey, we have this program for you when you're ready to come.' Shelters. I don't know. Shelters. Reunification with their kids when they're still incarcerated because that's hard. They don't have that privilege as a parent when you are incarcerated. You're like, just a number. You're just a number.

Delilah: We just have to be more aware and pay attention to the children and know that they are suffering from something. If kids are acting up, something's going on. If they're running away, something's going on. I think we just need to listen to the kids and let them know that they have a voice and hear what they have to say. A lot of times, we never give these kids a chance to say what they have to say.

Despite its considerable gang population, in Los Angeles there are surprisingly few organizations that address the needs of gang-affiliated individuals in general and women specifically.⁴¹ Homeboy Industries has worked hard over the years to expand their services to gang-affiliated individuals residing in the community, residential treatment centres, and even those who are incarcerated. Community-based organizations, like Homeboy, located in gang-entrenched areas such as East Los Angeles, stress the importance of working with members of the community in order to understand the issues from members' perspectives and provide them with appropriate services and resources which may help meet their needs.

The women interviewed, who had sustained a period of time away from the gang, discussed the importance of the services they were provided by Homeboy. They reported that the organization was the first in their lives to address their needs. Charlie, for example, who reported that she has struggled to "get clean," stated that each time she got released from jail or prison, she went back to Homeboy because she knew that it was a safe environment where she would not be judged and where she could continue to try to make improvements in her life:

I discovered a lot about myself here. The people here, the love they've given me here, the support here. I never had any of this, even with my own family. So to me, I consider this my family. My family that I had—my mother, my grandmother—they were never my family. They gave me love and they said they loved me, but to me it was a lie...because I don't think when you love someone you beat them; you do the things that hurt them. So, right here, this place has been here for me. They carried me when I couldn't walk. They carried me when I was on my knees. I respect this place, I respect everyone here.

Realizing that neither her family nor the gang could provide her with the kind of support she needed in order to integrate back into the community, Charlie returns to Homeboy for support, despite frequent relapses. One of the features of Homeboy that the women value most is the family-like environment that is fostered by its founder, Father Greg Boyle, and its staff members. Individuals from various gangs are forced to

⁴¹ For programs that do serve the needs of these populations, see: Girls in Gangs <http://www.girlsandgangs.org/>; Homeboy Industries, <http://www.homeboyindustries.org/>; Homies Unidos, homiesunidos.org; Legacy LA, <http://legacyla.org/>

interact and learn to respect one another despite their differences. While these interactions are not always embraced by members, the importance of this approach is two-fold: it teaches members how to respect one another without using street-tactics such as power and control in spite of their racial/ethnic or gang-related differences; and it promotes a healthy family-based model. While not a substitution for the biological family, Homeboy recognizes the importance of fostering an environment where individuals feel a sense of belonging and support, something they originally sought out through gang affiliation. Homeboy Industries offers many former gang members an alternative – a way in which to exit gang life.

Conclusion

Pyrooz and Decker (2011) defined desistance from the gang as a decrease in gang-related activity, specifically crime. While this definition was appropriate for the purpose of quantitative measurements and indeed allowed us to glean more insight into the life-course perspective of gang affiliation, it does not adequately explain the complexities involved in the process of disentangling oneself from the identity created through gang-affiliation, even after a member has ceased to affiliate.

Participants in the current study demonstrated that disengagement from the gang and gang lifestyle was a complex process that was neither rapid nor linear. The process was complex, and leaving was often influenced by myriad factors. The women explained how these factors were responsible for slowly eroding their identities as homegirls, their desire to participate in gang activity, and subsequently engage with their homeboys. While a few of the participants admitted that they were ambivalent about leaving the gang and disassociating with their homeboys, they did acknowledge implications of continued gang involvement.

Arlene and Natalie, for example, explained the challenges they faced after they were placed on a civil gang injunction and forced to disengage from their gang and from their homeboys. They talked about how they vacillated between kicking with their homeboys and trying to live a life that did not involve gang affiliation. Destiny, Alma, and Laura explained that once a person became part of a gang, they remained a part of it for

the rest of their lives, even if they stopped affiliating. According to these women, individuals can stop affiliating with the gang and their homeboys, but will, on some level continue to be “associated.” The idea of continued association is possibly the result of two factors. First, as Pyrooz and Decker (2011) suggest, it may be that after they disengage from the gang or move, they maintain contact with their friends or family members who still reside in the neighbourhood or who are gang-affiliated. The other implication of continued association, which is less frequently discussed in the literature, is that these women have, in part, internalized a gang identity. This is not to suggest that they continue to identify as gang members but rather that they, like anyone, recognize the importance and implications of their interactions and experiences. In other words, their perceptions of these interactions and experiences are necessarily implicated in how they come to understand themselves, both past and present, and how they see their futures. Despite the crimes they committed, witnessed, and to which they were victims, substance abuse in which they engaged, and prison time served, the women explained that these were all part of a learning process. As one participant succinctly stated, “I’m proud of what I did because it made me who I am today.”

Much of the literature on crime desistance in general, and gang desistance specifically shows that people who engage in criminal behaviour tend to mature, or, “age out” (Esbensen, Deschenes, & Winfree, 1999; Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983; Moffitt, 1993; Pyrooz & Decker 2011; Thornberry et al., 2003) of the lifestyle. Consistent with the life-course perspective, this does seem to be the case with the participants in this study. However, the idea of simply aging out of the gang lifestyle does not adequately convey the importance of other complex factors within the communities that are simultaneously responsible for changes in behaviour and women’s feelings about being part of the gang. For example, one must take into account the implications of temporality and a change of geographical space in order to gain a more thorough understanding of aging out, or moving on. In addition, changes within the barrio over decades may be implicated, in part, to changes within the community that have led to changes in street politics. Indeed, the constant influx of youngsters, or, new, up-and-coming gang-bangers in the neighbourhood is responsible for a change in gang dynamics because they bring with them values and behaviours representative of the time. Changes in time also expose the barrio to new drugs, something the participants noted affect gang dynamics.

As the familiarity of current beliefs, values and dynamics changed among the homeboys and homegirls, so did these women's understandings of their role in the gang. Personal changes, such as motherhood, also were implicated in participants' understanding of their roles within the gang and within their own lives. While motherhood was not necessarily the impetus for leaving the gang as other studies have shown (Fleisher & Krienert, 2004), it was a relevant factor involved in decreasing gang involvement and engagement in criminal activities for some women. For others, being physically separated from their children, either due to incarceration or a DCFS removal, encouraged them to question their lives and who they wanted to be. In other words, while motherhood was not necessarily a primary motivation to leave the lifestyle, it did eventually impact their beliefs and choices. For example, the trauma of losing her newborn baby because of her pre-natal substance abuse sent Nicole into a depression, and she began to become further involved in drug use and, thus, street life. Despite wanting help, she was surrounded by the lifestyle, exposed to more traumatic events, and thus became more entrenched in the lifestyle. Nicole's story shows how disengagement from the gang lifestyle is cyclical and how the experience the same event for some women could yield very different results for others.

Participants reported that they were presented with the idea of a healthier, safer lifestyle through their interactions with various systems along the way. Some women were exposed to treatment while in recovery houses; some were provided (limited) treatment and programming in prison; some had interactions with DCFS; and others were encouraged to make lifestyle changes through probation and parole. However, many of these delivery systems were punitive and diminished the women's agency to make decisions for themselves about their own lives. Because of the cyclical nature involved in disengaging from the gang, participants explained that they, and others, needed more programming to help deter them from the lifestyle in the first place or the provision intervention services. Programs such as Homeboy, for example, have performed outreach in the community and correctional system in order to provide information regarding services to gang-affiliated individuals. That is, the participants were presented with information and services, but they were given the choice to participate.

Some research has demonstrated that it is easier for less-entrenched, fringe members to leave the gang and that some of the older, more powerful members, *veteranos*, will always have ties that are more difficult to sever (Harris, 1994; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Though all of the women in this study argued that they were homegirls, thus implying that they played an important role within the gang, they denied having to be jumped out or that they or their family members were injured. For the purpose of understanding the exit process involved for Chicanas in gangs, these women's perceptions of their status or role in the gang was taken at face value. Whether or not they were fringe members is both unknown and irrelevant because these women provide insight into the complex process of gang disengagement and the multifaceted factors involved in this process. They further demonstrate how gender and gang performance is both socially-relevant and implicated through time, space, and social interactions. As such, it is important to contextualize and historicize the ways in which these women perform gender and subsequently perform gang (Garot, 2010).

Young, gang-affiliated women are arguably constrained by the larger raced, classed, and gendered social structures within which they reside and, simultaneously, constrained by the power dynamics that exist in a male-dominated quasi-institution. However, they also exhibited their ability to push against those systems which constrain them and perform their identity in a socially relevant way. Thus, as temporality impacts gang dynamics and influences behavioural changes and expectations, these women discursively (re)construct their own identities in conjunction with their own perceptions. In addition to identity (re)construction, participants offered their own expression of agency by making a decision to exit the gang. They exemplified the constant push and pull to remain in or leave the gang. They explained how they eventually made a choice that was relevant for them and their lives at a particular time and under specific circumstances. Finally, they demonstrated the ways in which they exhibited agency through the negotiation of their new lives and new identities. On one hand, they expressed an ability to see themselves in a new light—living a lifestyle that they had never experienced before. On the other hand, they continued to struggle with their old identities which were so deeply entrenched in their self-image.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

Introduction

Throughout this dissertation I have stressed the importance of understanding identity politics for and among gang-affiliated Chicanas residing primarily in East Los Angeles. I have specifically focused on the multitude of ways in which subjectivity is constituted and reconstituted throughout time, space, and through social interactions and how human agency is implicated as a result. Understanding the (re)construction of identity among marginalized populations requires an intersectional approach that takes into account the ways in which race, class, gender, and sexuality are inextricably linked to identity formation and the ways in which these women perform these constructs in socio-spatially and temporally relevant ways. As such, I have shown how the identities of these women are in “constant flux” (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Urrieta Jr, 2007, p. 119). When attempting to understand identity-politics among various groups, and particularly among those who have been marginalized, it is crucial that we avoid essentializing subjectivity and, instead, contextualize, historicize, and politicize their individual and collective experiences in order to truly appreciate their understandings of how these experiences have shaped them. Thus, I have argued that in order to create an epistemologically relevant framework, we must consistently engage in these practices.

The women in this study have explained how their understanding of their identities changed through different periods in their lives. From “doing gang” (Garot, 2010) in their hoods and among their homies, to performing gender and sexuality in prison, and then (re)constructing their raced, classed, and gendered identities as they negotiated the process of disengaging from the gang, the women demonstrated how their experiences and interactions played a role in their worldviews, the ways in which

they understand their own subjectivities, and how these perceptions inform(ed) their decisions, both past and present.

In his explication of Holland et al.'s (1998) discussion of figured worlds, Urrieta (2007) explains that the “significance of figured worlds is in how they are recreated by people’s social engagement with each other in localized and temporal spaces that give voice to particular landscapes and experiences” (p. 120). I expand upon this concept and argue below that the narrative process provides both a space and social interaction (between participant and researcher) through which the story-teller may further develop her identity, or rather, her perception of her identity (Ochs & Capps, 1996; Riessman, 1987).

While gang researchers have acknowledged the tendency of gang members to exaggerate their experiences (see Campbell, 1984; Moore & Hagedorn, 2001), exaggeration was not a concern for the purpose of this research. Rather, I was interested in participants’ having the freedom to express themselves in a way that was meaning-making for them at that particular point in their lives. Being able to make meaning of their personal experiences, or the experiences of others, which they had witnessed or heard about was important for their self-presentation and, subsequently, understanding of themselves and their lives. Whether or not they recounted events exactly as they had occurred, or whether they shared stories pieced together from fragments of their own experiences and the experiences of others, the stories the women shared were clearly socially and contextually relevant for them, the importance of which was two-fold: (1) through their narrative they were able to convey a particular message about the significance of their lives and the implications of gang affiliation even if they were not at the centre of all of the events they recounted; and (2) using narrative has been shown to assist individuals in understanding their past behaviour and allowing them to simultaneously construct a new identity (King, 2013) —an important practice for demonstrating agentic expression.

As suggested by gang literature, though they expose members—particularly young women—to further violence and danger (Miller, 2001), gangs do, in part, provide certain social advantages for youth such as a sense of identity, feelings of protection,

and a social milieu in which they can relate to others with similar backgrounds (see Vigil, 1988). Vigil (1983, 1988) and Bankston (1998) have shown how second generation youth in general, and Chicana/o youth in East Los Angeles in particular, are susceptible to the pull of the streets because of multiple marginalization. Consistent with Vigil's work, participants explained their difficulty constructing a sense of self that reconciled the pull from their families to embrace traditional Mexican values, and their need to fit in with the larger social world by embracing American values transmitted to them through school and the media. Thus, these women were forced to actively negotiate two cultures as well as to withstand the pressures of understanding their own amalgamated identities. The gang, then, provided them a social milieu in which they were able to find a sense of belonging; they could identify with others who shared similar experiences and, subsequently, to make sense of their Chicana identity.

In this study, all of the participants reported that they were homegirls, or core members of their gang. They dismissed most of the other women in their gang and other gangs as being hoodrats or fringe members. Interestingly, the way in which the participants dichotomized their identities and roles, and those of the hoodrats, was deeply rooted in a gendered and sexual power-imbued hierarchy. While this hierarchy was not unique to women in the gang, and indeed was reflective of values, attitudes, and behaviours of people within the larger social environment (Miller, 2001, 2002a; Miller & Brunson, 2000), participants' descriptions of these dynamics, within the context of the gang, reflected one of the ways in which Chicanas were defined by larger socio-structural constraints and simultaneously exerted agency through their discursive practices—something Campbell (1987) aptly refers to as “self-definition by rejection.”

These practices are important and require significant consideration because they represent a central mode through which individuals within groups define “in” and “out” members (Becker, 1963). By defining the “who’s who” of social groups, members exert agency because they construct a differential identity for “everyone else” (i.e., hoodrats) in relation to themselves (i.e., homegirls). The participants in this study came from marginalized backgrounds and generally experienced oppressive circumstances such as poverty, racism, sexism. In other words, these women had limited opportunities to express themselves within the larger social environment; constraints placed upon them

since birth were out of their control. However, to say that social constraints prevented these women from exhibiting agency and pushing back against the systems that constrained them would be a fallacy. Participants explained how they were, in part, responsible for defining themselves, their roles, others, and, in the process, redefining those very structures that placed restrictions on their gendered performance. Referring to oneself as a “tomboy” was one way in which the participants worked to redefine the way that we understand female performance of gender within a gang context (see also Miller, 2001). That is, participants vociferously rejected the performance of femininity, stating that women were not respected because they were not willing to put in work—a concept associated with doing masculinity—for the sake of the gang. Instead, they actively distanced themselves from women who engaged in overtly feminine behaviour, discounted the idea that they could be “down” members, and used pejorative labels to describe their sexuality (Kolb & Palys, 2012; Schalet, Hunt, & Joe-Laidler, 2003).

Participants described how these practices, while slightly different among incarcerated women, were implicated in behaviour and the rules that governed behaviour. Prison relationships—whether familial or sexual—and the manners in which women performed their gender and sexuality upon entering this environment were constrained by discursive heteronormative representations of what should be. Yet these women simultaneously (re)constructed their gender and sexuality to meet their specific needs within a specific time and space. The idea of being “gay for the stay, straight at the gate” illuminated the importance of contextualizing gendered and sexualized experiences and acknowledging the significance of space in this process. In a space where women faced numerous types of constraints—social expectations of heteronormative practices, spatial confines of the prison, and prison rules regarding behaviour that were governed by discourse—they also were active in redefining their gender and sexuality in relation to one another.

The final major theme that emerged from the data was centred on how the participants explained their experiences relating to disengagement from the gang. While some women expressed ambivalence about where they were in the process of disengagement and the status of their affiliation, others reported that leaving the gang was a matter of geographical relocation and maintaining physical distance from their

neighbourhood and their homies. Participants explained that leaving the gang was neither an immediate nor easy thing to do but rather a process that involved myriad factors. Factors such as incarceration, exposure to extreme violence, acknowledgement that their homies were not there for them as they initially believed, and motherhood, all were implicated (in various ways) in participants' decision to sever their gang ties. Throughout the disengagement process, and even after it, participants struggled to negotiate their understanding of their past and present selves, and questioned how their decision might impact their future. The prevalence of gangs within their neighbourhoods, and the desire to receive affection, attention, and feel part of something, all factored into their decision to join the gang.

Acknowledging one's role as a researcher and, specifically as that of an "outsider," or non-member of the community being researched, has been the source of controversy for decades within academia and within racial/ethnic communities (see Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Some academics and activists argue that outsiders conducting research on marginalized groups of which they are not a member is problematic because the researcher can never fully understand the issues facing the group they are studying. Others argue that outsiders may be able to provide a unique view of certain phenomena precisely because they are not part of that community and therefore are worthy contributors to discussions regarding oppression because they may be aware of things that an insider might miss (Burgess, 2002; Faulkner & Becker, 2008; Fay, 1996; McIntosh, 1998).

Upon undertaking qualitatively-based research as an outsider, it is imperative that the researcher remains reflexive and reflective of her experiences and interactions with those involved in the research process (Burgess, 1984). Unfortunately, it is often the case that marginalized people's voices are not heard because of their social positioning and because they have been denied equal access to resources such as an education equivalent to their white, middle-class counterparts. It is not my intention to argue that I have adequately "given" voice to the participants in this study, but rather, I hope that this project can be interpreted as a collaboration between participants and me. That is, the participants generously provided their time to share often difficult stories about their lives in hopes that their experiences might contribute to outsider's understanding of women

involved in gangs and aid in efforts to improve the lives of at-risk youth. Thus, these women spoke to me, giving themselves a voice, and it is my hope that I have remained true to them and have represented their words as accurately as possible.

In order to ensure that their voices were represented accurately and their voices not lost, it is my aspiration that this project contribute both to academia and the communities in which these women reside and, thus, incorporate academia with praxis. Academics, educators, community activists, and community members alike can benefit from working together and, through knowledge exchange, determine what issues need to be addressed and how best to do this. This dissertation is only a piece of the equation. It is my hope that this research can be used to aid those on the front line—participants, community members, and treatment providers—so that they can advocate for services and programming they believe their communities need. It is, unfortunately, often the case that many whites withdraw from discussions about race and marginalization because they do not feel it is their place to have a voice. Critical race activists and scholars, however, cite the importance of democratizing this discussion because oppression affects everyone (see, for example, Bergerson, 2003). I argue that the production and reproduction of oppressive conditions, used to marginalize certain individuals, is a topic about which everyone needs to collaborate. In order for systemic change to occur, individuals with various vested interests need to advocate for that change and work to create counter-hegemonic practices which are traditionally used to oppress those who have no voice in the affairs which affect their lives. Therefore, it is imperative that academia inform practice and that practice guides academia, specifically educational and social justice-based research.

The importance of having one's voice heard is three-fold. First, it implies that as members of a larger social community, we need to open up discursive space so that women like those in this study have a forum through which they can share their lived experiences and collaborate with others directly or indirectly involved. For example, as Vigil (2007) suggested, these communities and their members would greatly benefit from intra-agency and governmental collaboration. In addition, these agencies could better serve the needs of individuals within these communities if they further collaborated with and were informed by grassroots level organizations. It is imperative those affected by

these unique problems be able to express their specific needs so that macro-level agencies can begin to effectively address them. Policy and community outreach must be informed by those who are directly affected.

Second, participants said that not only they but society at large would benefit by being heard by those who reside in privileged areas such as parts of West LA and know nothing about the lives or experiences of their neighbours on the other side of the city. Participants said that they often feel judged by others, specifically those of higher socio-economic status. They said that they would like to be given a second chance to lead a more pro-social lifestyle, but because they were not exposed to this type of lifestyle in the first place, they have more hurdles to jump and limited resources to help them move forward. Moreover, they have already been engaged in the gang lifestyle and are at an additional disadvantage because of the stigma associated with decisions they made during that time. Frequent reminders of the lifestyle such as gang-related tattoos,—often in obvious places such as the face, neck, and hands— lengthy criminal records, and lack of a legitimate job history all merge and hinder these women’s ability to integrate into mainstream culture, which, they said, is disheartening and has led them back to the street lifestyle with which they are familiar and for which no resume is required. Some participants, like Syria, made a plea, asking their privileged counterparts to listen to them, “take a walk” in their neighbourhoods, and “let us give you that little mind change and show you that we’re better than you think.”

Because of their relative positions on the social hierarchy, these women understand that decisions about their lives are made for them by those who have not lived their lives but make judgments based on what they think is going on. As such, it is important to bridge communities. This might include inviting residents of other communities to school or community events, to tutor or mentor students, to visit or volunteer in community agencies, or to simply walk through their schools. It might include speakers from organizations serving these communities to engage in dialogues with neighbourhood groups or in other neighbourhood schools. It might involve school district-wide in-service training for teachers about the various ethnic and cultural groups residing within the city. Many of these ideas have already been attempted, but the problem with most good intentions is that they are done once and never receive the

attention or momentum to continue. If one truly believes that these young lives should not be wasted on the streets, then we must find ways to initiate and maintain a structured and dynamic dialogue among various socio-economic groups. This is a radical undertaking, but one that can be done by people of good will and a sense of commonwealth.

Participants said that the third implication of privileging their voices meant having an outlet through which they could express themselves. Therefore, it is important to create more community-based prevention and intervention programs that allow young women an arena in which they feel comfortable expressing their problems and fears. Joana said, “People could be acting reckless and doing crazy things because they need help, but they don’t know how to ask for help, so they go out and do crazy things. But if somebody would sit there and listen to these people – just sit there and listen – I think that would help a lot.” It is amazing to me that simply being able to talk about the issues that are relevant to their lives is so important to these women. It demonstrates how important having a voice in their own affairs is to them and that simply being heard is empowering in and of itself. Gaining this ability may assist them in gaining a meaningful understanding of their own experiences and identity and deter them from looking to the streets in order to gain acceptance and feel understood.

“Like, you’re supposed to rehabilitate yourself...”: Challenges to gang prevention and intervention:

Many researchers have proposed and/or explored ideas about how best to address the issue of gang-affiliation among youth and young adults (see, for example, Leap, 2013; Peterson & Esbensen, 2004b; Spergel et al., 1994; Vigil, 2007). From grassroots efforts, such as community outreach (Spergel et al., 1991) to educationally-based curriculum implementation that address gang-related issues (Astor, Meyer, Benbenishty, Marachi, & Rosemond, 2005), researchers and community-based workers provide us with ideas about programming that does, in some cases, happen to be effective. Unfortunately, budget cuts and governmental inclination to fund large organizations, as opposed to community-based programs, greatly affects the number of programs operating within the communities and their ability to run groups, do outreach

and generally promote their services (Leap, 2013) when community-based organizations usually have a better sense of community needs.

For example, during the 2010 fiscal year, Homeboy Industries experienced significant financial problems that greatly affected the ability of the organization to serve at-risk individuals in the community. While the crisis was not directly linked to government funding, it was affected by the recession. Homeboy financial officers had calculated how much money they could generate through their businesses (i.e., Homegirl Café and Bakery), but they did not anticipate the economic crisis. As such, the organization suffered from a significant loss of income, had to lay off many of their professional staff, and was forced to decline services to over 300 at-risk individuals looking to Homeboy for treatment, employment, and other services. Many of the staff members remained with the organization, volunteering their time to keep the organization afloat, and the organization was forced to ask professional treatment providers in the community to volunteer their services for individuals in need.

Eventually Los Angeles County contributed \$1.5 million to Homeboy, but it came too late and was insufficient to sustain the same type of services for the high volume of clientele served by the organization. Currently, the organization generates 46% of their funding from their businesses and 54% from individual donors (Veronica Vargas, Director of External Affairs at Homeboy Industries, personal communication, 2014). Neither the City of Los Angeles, nor Los Angeles County, currently contributes any funding to this organization, which has served as a model for significantly decreasing violence and recidivism, and increasing pro-social behaviour (Leap, 2013).⁴²

In addition to a lack of funding for community-based initiatives, the State of California has drastically cut treatment, educational, and skills training programs throughout the State (Rodriguez, 2005). Participants expressed the fact that one of their major problems re-integrating into the community after being released from prison was that they did not receive the treatment, support, education, or vocational skills needed to

⁴² Leap (2013) and colleagues are currently conducting a 5-year longitudinal study on treatment-based outcomes from Homeboy Industries. Their preliminary findings suggest that the organization's services and model have significant implications in terms of benefiting clientele.

escape their previous lifestyles and live lives that encompassed pro-social relationships with partners, friends, and their children in addition to gainful employment. Participants explained that they left prison feeling that they were worse off than when they entered. A lack of programming and (if they were lucky) participation in menial labour not only left them with no work skills, no education, and unresolved trauma, but also compounded their issues rendering them virtually unemployable due to their felony convictions. Moreover, many women who lost custody of their children when they were sentenced to prison reported that they received no parenting classes that would have allowed them to learn how to parent their children effectively and reclaim their children upon release.

Aside from budget cuts and lack of funding for treatment, prevention, and intervention programs, there historically has been significant tension between Latino communities and the police due to aggressive, racially-based policing tactics (Reck, 2014). Participants stated that they did not trust the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) because of brutality and corruption that they either experienced personally or witnessed first-hand. Some participants reported that they did not feel comfortable phoning the police when they were victimized by their partners or others on the streets because: (a) they did not trust police to adequately address the problem; and (b) pervasive tensions have persisted between the police and community members. They had been raised to believe that conflict is best resolved within the community. Chela, for example, recounted a story whereby she and her mother were physically assaulted and racially discriminated against by two officers patrolling the projects where she grew up. Laura reported a close business relationship with several members of the LAPD who played a central role in helping her gang run prostitution and drug rings. In fact, these officers assisted in transporting Laura and her homeboys to “safe” locations where they were assured that they would not get arrested for conducting illicit drug sales. While the police, in many instances, create tension with the residents and are often, for good reason, met with mistrust, overall police presence is limited in these communities (Vigil, 2007).

Despite the conflictual relationship that exists between residents and the police, the LAPD’s reluctance to expend more resources by increasing police presence in these areas, plagued by crime and violence, has led to an increase in crime (Vigil, 2007). Vigil

has argued that there is a lack of continuity between social services agencies such as DCFS and LAPD. Lack of communication between LAPD, DCFS, and other social service agencies meant that these women and their children have fallen through the cracks in the multiple systems in which they are involved, and their complex problems have been compartmentalized and addressed as separate issues because of lack of communication and continuity between agencies and organizations. In other words, there are few resources available to women that address their multifaceted problems such as domestic abuse, sexual abuse, and victimization on the streets and in their households as well as the economic strain of single motherhood.

In addition to lack of collaborative efforts on behalf of the police, governmental agencies, and community-based groups, failure to address educationally-based problems within the schools can be implicated in youth who look to the streets and their homies in order to develop a meaningful identity (Romo & Falbo, 1996). Public schools within the inner-city are poorly funded and overcrowded, and due to budget constraints, offer limited educational or extracurricular resources for students. There are not enough teachers who want to teach in urban schools, like those in East LA; teachers are often overburdened by class size and dealing with students with special needs; and there remains a lack of teachers who are culturally competent and knowledgeable about the unique issues faced by Chicana/o students. Many students struggle with homework because oftentimes they are more likely than their white, middle-class counterparts to assist their families with domestic responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, and child care. Parents are more likely to be mono-lingual Spanish speakers, and they are often uneducated and thus unable to assist their children with homework. Further compounding this problem is that the fact that there are few, if any, after-school programs to assist youth with their homework and offer supportive educational and recreational activities. Of further importance is the fact that traditionally prevailing norms and values are reproduced within the educational system and transmitted to Chicana/o students. The problem with this is that these norms and values may not be embraced by students because they are in stark contrast to the cultural values and messages they receive in their (Mexican) homes. In other words, the public education system fails to provide a culturally relevant curriculum and, as a result, students have difficulty relating to the material being presented.

Throughout this dissertation I have addressed the multiple intersecting systemic constraints at play in these young women's lives and which, indeed, play a role in their understandings of self and of self within their environment. While these issues cannot be ignored, the problems these women face are inextricably intertwined, and the implications for gang affiliation resonate at several levels: macro, meso, and micro, all of which are also interconnected. In his 2007 work on family dynamics and gang membership in East Los Angeles, Vigil (2007) argues that while structural problems do, in fact, impact the families in his study,

[T]he families that were most lacking in resources have the most serious troubles with their children....Moreover, personal and emotional difficulties abounded for these families, as the adults seemed to have lost their coping skills and strategies because of early unresolved traumas and voids in their own lives" (pp. 195-196).

Though other researchers have made policy recommendations to address gang membership and curb gang violence, participants stated that women in particular were in need of programs to address their unique needs. Domestic violence, sexual abuse, navigating motherhood, and use of drugs to cope with these issues were all problems that these women felt were dismissed by governmental agencies and were not readily available within their communities. Marissa was vocal in her belief that women-specific programming was necessary and that women's needs have gone unaddressed: "I feel like they take women as a joke." The question then becomes: How do we best address the issue of gang membership among young Chicanas residing in the inner city? What do the women directly affected by these issues believe is necessary for their own well-being and to help deter other young Chicanas from taking the same path? What type of culturally-specific programming can be created and implemented to address their unique needs?

"Teach her all these things she needs": Implications and policy recommendations:

We're humans too. We're women, and a lot of us grow out of it, but some of us need help. We don't know nothing better. We end up with five kids sometimes, and we're on our own; so we stayed to our gang because they're the only one that will accept us and help us, you

know? We need a chance. We need help. We are humans too. A lot of us don't have no choice about where we grow up or how we were raised. A lot of women were born into a gang family, and we don't know no other life. I would say, man, just help us out! (Marissa)

Throughout this project I have addressed the deeply entrenched, omnipresent structural challenges that are implicated in the marginalization of the women in this study and women within the communities in which these women reside. The structures that govern how these women are expected to unquestioningly embrace and perform race, class, gender, and sexuality within their various social milieus have greatly impacted the ways in which they understand their own identities. Through their narratives, participants revealed how they were both constrained by these social forces but also actively engaged in their own socially and contextually relevant behaviours that allowed them to retain agency. Certainly some of these deeply entrenched structural issues are difficult to change on a macro level without radical mobilization from those who are directly and indirectly involved. That does not, however, preclude us from tackling these monolithic challenges one-at-a-time by focusing our attention on what is possible on the macro, meso, and micro levels.

“Sit there and listen to these people”: Creating space for voice

Throughout this project it became clear that the participants were exceedingly aware of the constraints forced upon them due to their race, class, and gender. When they spoke about the challenges that they faced, participants explained how being a racial minority, living in poverty, living on “the wrong side of town,” and being female impacted them. They recognized their role as “other” within their own racial/ethnic communities, gangs, and within society at large. They were constantly reminded of their “femaleness” whether in the home or on the streets. They were expected to help their mothers with domestic duties in the home because they were girls. In addition, participants addressed the issue of being female on the streets. They argued that they were equal to their male counterparts, but simultaneously acknowledged that they could never be homeboys because they had to put in extra work to be respected by the males. Furthermore, they addressed the fact that they grew up in poverty and addressed the

implications that economic deprivation had on their lives. While some may argue that oppressed groups are apolitical and thus unable to fight their marginalized positions, there are subtle ways in which everyone—these participants included—push back against the very structures that constrain them in order to “make a name” for themselves and “be somebody.” The argument that marginalized individuals are apolitical and simply passive victims of their social situation(s) is both false and leads us into dangerous territory because it fails to take into account that people are aware of the impact of structural constraints on their lives. In addition, this argument works to further silence marginalized individuals because of their positions within the raced, classed, and gendered hierarchy of power.

When participants were asked what they thought they, and other women like them, needed in order to escape or avoid gang life, everyone agreed on two points:

1. They should not be judged by society—especially those who had never experienced their lifestyles. Participants said that they often felt discriminated against and that they were not given a second chance because of preconceived societal notions about women involved in gangs; and
2. Girls and women in these communities need to be heard. Participants said that they were denied a voice in their families, on the streets, and in prison because they were girls/women, and, as a result, their needs met were never met. They never learned how to express themselves in their homes; they did not have recreational or extracurricular programs that allowed them a voice, and they felt unheard.

“Prepare us to come out back to the world”: Risk/needs, incarceration, and reintegration

Participants who had served time in prison said that their involvement with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) not only failed to meet their needs and prepare them for release but actually hindered their ability to reintegrate in the community and make pro-social choices that would positively impact their futures and the futures of their children. During the 1980s and 1990s, fiscal spending on incarceration increased significantly due to Tough-on-Crime policies that included costly punitive measures such as three-strikes, mandatory minimums, and truth-in-sentencing (Wilhelm & Turner, 2002). Even though the crime rate steadily declined since 1995, the

number of people incarcerated increased significantly, and in the United States that means mass incarceration of minorities (Anand, 2012). While the CDCR decreased the number of effective programs offered to inmates (i.e., education, rehabilitation, therapeutic, and skills training), California's prison population continued to skyrocket. Rather than providing treatment and rehabilitative programming, inmates are often given medication to "address" their mental health needs and to decrease the likelihood of behavioural infractions/institutional misconduct (Treatment advocacy center, 2010). One participant, Little One, reported that she and her "cellies" were prescribed antipsychotic medication when they reported feelings of depression as a result of their childhood trauma and incarceration. Participants reported that they felt worse-off upon their release than when they went in because their needs had not been addressed and their feelings of depression, anger, and hopelessness were compounded by the fact that they now had a felony conviction added to their already spotty records and were going to have more trouble finding housing, regaining custody of their children, and finding gainful employment. With recidivism rates for young adult (male and female) offenders above 75%, and rates just under 50% for offenders age 60 and above (Anand, 2012) , it is obvious that the system is failing inmates. The use of medication suggests the emphasis is on behaviour management and pacification instead of providing rehabilitative services.

While men comprise the majority of the prison population in the United States (Wright, Salisbury, & Van Voorhis, 2007), the rate of female incarceration is rising more steeply than that of males. Between 1980 and 2010 female incarceration in the U.S increased by 646% (The Sentencing Project, 2012). In addition, women were less likely than their male counterparts to be incarcerated for violent offences but were more likely to be incarcerated for drug-related offences and property offences related to their drug problems (Bloom, 1999).⁴³ Between 2000 and 2009 the number of incarcerated Latinas increased by 23.3%. In other words, the ratio of Latina to white inmates is 3:2⁴⁴ indicating a clear overrepresentation of incarcerated Latinas (Mauer, 2013).

⁴³ Approximately one-quarter of female offenders are incarcerated on drug-related offences (Wright et al., 2007).

⁴⁴ The ratio of African American females to their white counterparts is higher.

While both male and female offenders often come from marginalized socio-economic backgrounds, female offenders have qualitatively different needs that are not being addressed by gender-neutral risk/needs assessments or by the correctional system (Wright et al., 2007).⁴⁵ Women are significantly more likely to enter prison suffering from diagnosable mental health issues (for example, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and substance abuse) related to sexual abuse, domestic violence, parenting challenges, and low self-esteem (Bloom, 1999; Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2003; Grella & Greenwell, 2007; Wright et al., 2007). Despite what we know about the differences in risk/needs between male and female offenders, current risk assessment instruments such as the Northpointe COMPAS (Brennan, Dieterich, & Oliver, 2006; Dietrich, 1998) and Level of Service Inventory–Revised (LSI-R; Andrews & Bonta, 1995) do not reflect gender specific concerns and, therefore, do little to help us address women’s unique risk/needs (Wright et al., 2007). Classification systems that have been validated using male samples are not necessarily valid for assessing women’s risk/needs (Hardyman & Van Voorhis, 2004). Supposedly gender-neutral instruments actually work against women because they often lead to women being placed in higher security than necessary, which denies them rehabilitative, educational, and treatment programming (Wright et al., 2007). Wright et al. (2007) concluded that correctional systems should include gender-neutral and gender-responsive classification systems because some classification systems to address women’s risk/needs were in line with those of men, but others were gender-specific. Utilizing both types of classification systems would help to identify the likelihood of recidivism, address what types of programming women require, and allow for appropriate supervision while women are involved in the criminal justice system (p. 334). The authors conclude that: “For a needs-based approach to work effectively, institutional settings must (a) be treatment intensive, (b) have competent case management, and (c) strive for wrap-around and re-entry services” (p. 335).

Participants consistently stated that they would have fared better during their time in prison and upon their release had they been offered treatment and educational

⁴⁵ For further discussion of gender responsive needs and treatment, see (Boehm et al., 2005) <http://static.nicic.gov/Library/021815.pdf>

programming while incarcerated. They confirmed what research has consistently shown: women have unique needs and require gender-responsive programming. Bloom (1999) argued that women's "greatest needs are for comprehensive treatment for drug abuse and trauma recovery as well as education and training in job and parenting skills" (p. 1). When female offenders leave the chaotic, unpredictable, and often dangerous streets and enter prison, they are thrown into an artificial environment where they have to forge various relationships with other inmates in order to survive. However, sometimes these women's physical and emotional needs go unmet during their incarceration. If prison has the potential to foster familial and intimate relationships (some stable and supportive and some chaotic and violent) for women, the question remains: what can be done in prison to foster healthy relationships between inmates, inmates and treatment professionals, and between the women and their children so that their needs are met?

One such program we should consider emulating is the specialized correctional facility for women at the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge in Saskatchewan, Canada, which allows and encourages women to foster healthy relationships with one another and with their children, provides treatment programming, and has been shown to be effective in terms of low recidivism rates (Green & Motiuk, 2000). In fact, participants reported that they would have benefitted from treatment and interpersonal skills-based groups such as parenting to teach them requisite skills for fostering a healthy relationship with their children. Kimberly suggested that women be united with their children during their incarceration in order to forge a healthy relationship with them upon release: "[Women need] reunification with their kids when they're still incarcerated because that's hard. They don't have that privilege as a parent when you are incarcerated." When women are sentenced to prison, they escape their street life and can, in some cases, escape their street identity if only temporarily. Through incarceration, these women may reconstruct their identities based upon their new environment and relationships with others, though these relationships are many times unhealthy and, as participants said, they tend to return to their previous unhealthy relationships on the streets because that is the only thing they know.

In addition to educational and rehabilitative treatment programs within the correctional system, participants said that they would have benefitted from proper

reintegration services. As Wright et al. (2007) suggest that the creation of wrap-around services would be helpful in order to address the multifaceted problems that women face upon reintegration. For example, Little One suggested that the City purchase a few of the many foreclosed, empty, and deteriorating houses in East LA and turn them into rehabilitative homes for mothers and their children. The importance of this, she suggested, would be three-fold: (1) to provide transitional housing for women upon their community re-entry; (2) to provide women with parenting skills in a supportive environment; and (3) to provide women with treatment for challenges with mental health and substance abuse. Another participant, Veronica, agreed that women need gender-sensitive supportive housing environments designed specifically to meet their unique needs. She reported that she was placed in a coed halfway house upon her release where she was required to attend coed treatment groups and men and women were expected to share personal, often traumatic stories with the group. She stated that the treatment facility failed to address her needs as a woman because it did not foster an environment where she or other women felt safe disclosing personal issues. As a result, she said that she felt as though the system had set her up for failure.

“Try to help us better our future with education”: Addressing educational needs

Prison should be a last resort for dealing with problematic, violent behaviour. Because gang membership and engaging in delinquent behaviour associated with membership is so strongly correlated to factors such as substance abuse, mental health problems, a history of physical and sexual abuse, poor educational attainment as a result of poor attendance, and the lack of educational support at home or in school (Dietrich, 1998; Miller, 2001; Moore & Hagedorn, 1991; Portillos, 1999; Vigil, 1988, 2007), it is imperative to address these meso and micro level issues in order to intervene and divert at-risk youth from becoming engaged in the criminal justice system. Gang prevention programs implemented within public schools have had positive outcomes in terms of decreasing gang activity, but they do little to address the complex and intertwined issues which impact at-risk, marginalized youth, specifically Chicana/o students. For example, Esbensen and Osgood (1999) have confirmed that the Gang

Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) program, implemented in schools in a number of states, has significantly increased pro-social behaviours in students who have participated. GREAT was designed and implemented to educate youth about gang membership and inform them of the consequences of gang membership. While this program has shown positive results in terms of decreasing anti-social behaviour, it does not necessarily address the important identity-related factors that are inherently linked to gang membership in Chicana/o youth.

Research shows that second-generation youth, specifically Chicana/o youth, often struggle to negotiate their dual or multiple identities (Dietrich, 1998; Vigil, 1988). They are taught and, indeed, absorb disparate values and messages about future expectations and interpretations of their experiences. Participants confirm that they often struggled as youth to make sense of their experiences and understand themselves as Chicanas (though some referred to themselves as Latina) rather than as simply Mexican or American. Gang membership is one means through which these women actively negotiate their Chicana identities because the gang provides an outlet and opens up space in which these women may, in part, come to understand their own identities through their relationship with other marginalized youth. As Dietrich (1998) and Vigil (1988) argue, constant negotiation of dual identity creates challenges for many Chicana/o youth and is implicated in street socialization and subsequent gang membership. There are few, if any, programs within the public schools or community that are able to assist these youth in fostering a healthy self-perception within a safe arena.

Scholarly literature presents a relationship between low educational attainment among Latina/os (specifically, high drop-out rates) and a propensity toward gang affiliation (Romo & Falbo, 1997). Individuals who have higher levels of education are less likely to join gangs and engage in delinquent behaviour. The problem, however, is that marginalized students are often bored by school and the curriculum. Almost all participants reported feeling bored in school. This is consistent with previous literature which shows that Chicana/o youth have difficulty relating to the academic material because it does not adequately reflect their raced, classed, and gendered experiences (Dietrich, 1998). In his study on activist identity formation among Chicana/os in higher education, Urrieta (2007) found that exposure to unique Chicana/o issues through

multiple mediums within the academy are important in the identity construction process. While his study was conducted with Chicana/o university students, his findings suggest that the lived experiences of the participants must be taken into account in order to allow Chicana/os space to form a subjectivity which is both socially and culturally relevant. Unfortunately, the participants in Urrieta's study were not exposed to information, resources, or given the space to develop a more contextualized subjectivity until they entered higher education.

A combination of these students' lack of exposure to a culturally relevant curriculum and that they are often ill-equipped for educational success due to a lack of resources within public schools (e.g., tutoring, after-school programming, and lack of individualized attention to educational problems), little family support, and poor educational attainment, leaves few Latino/Chicanos in a position to access higher education (Dietrich, 1998). Most of the students Dietrich interviewed blamed themselves for their lack of academic achievement, stating that it was the result of their laziness. The same was true of many of the participants in this study. Certainly some students are less enthusiastic about school than others, do not believe it to be relevant, and thus do not actively engage in their own education. However, much of the critical pedagogical literature suggests that racial/ethnic minority students do internalize the myth of the meritocratic system that is reproduced within the public schools, and subsequently take personal responsibility for their academic shortcomings. Thus, while middle and high school students are responsible for engaging in their own educational experiences, it is important for educators to create an open and accommodating, culturally relevant environment whereby material is conveyed to students in a variety of ways in order to adapt to different learning styles.

One way of addressing the propensity toward street socialization for young, Chicana/o students is to foster an environment in which they are able to make meaning of their cultural identity. Development and implementation of a culturally relevant curriculum within schools (often called multicultural education) may be helpful in encouraging students from various ethnic backgrounds to actively engage in the educational process and to develop socially, politically, contextually relevant identities. It may also assist them in negotiating and understanding the intricacies of their lived

experiences. It appears nonsensical that multicultural, socio-economically, disadvantaged students are only taught through a cultural lens that does not include their histories or cultures. Denying individuals the opportunity to learn about their histories and identities while attending public schools prevents them from developing a healthy identity during a crucial developmental stage in their lives. Participants in Urrieta's (2007) study reported that classes such as Chicana/o studies, Latin-American history, and Spanish are important in order for them to make meaning of their cultural identities and to derive cultural understanding which they believed was denied them during their school years (p. 131). As a result, they reported feeling angry and saddened and began to develop their own culturally relevant identity; however, it was not until they attended university that they were exposed to their cultural distinctiveness and provided a space in which they could do so.

Participants in this project acknowledged that when they were children they wanted to grow up and have a professional career, and yet did not appear to understand what was required to become a doctor or teacher, for example. In other words, there was a disconnect between what they were told was possible and how they could actually realize these occupational goals. The combination of being told what they should strive for, coupled with little or no guidance about how to actually fulfill their goals, and meant that there was no opportunity to actually accomplish them in the first place. If young, minority students are not taught what is possible for them in the first place, they end up having empty goals, realizing that what they desire is not attainable and are, consequently, drawn to the streets and socialized there. Very few are likely to pursue higher education, an institution in which they may be exposed to their own cultural dynamics as well as other cultural dynamics.

Public education is one of the institutions which, unfortunately, contributes to a sense of hopelessness and despair for many Latino students. That is not to say that they do not receive some benefit from schooling, but the vast majority of those whom I interviewed did not. Giroux (1997) argues that that pedagogy must become more political in order to "address the construction of historical memory, issues of national identity, the purpose of schooling and the meaning of democracy" (pp. 235-236). In the classroom a greater emphasis on multiculturalism liberates not only African Americans,

Latinos and other members of minority cultures but also liberates whites, who know little of their own history much less the histories of minority cultures and how the amalgamation of both cultures has informed and continues to inform their understanding of their power-imbued roles within the social and political hierarchy.

In addition to the lack of a democratic educational process, there are too few Latina/o and Chicana/o educators serving a community of youth that is rapidly increasing (Urrieta, 2007, p. 138). Minority students—in this case, Chicanas—lack positive role models within and outside of the public school setting and their communities (Dietrich, 1998). In their innovative work on identity formation, Herring and Lave (2000) discuss the importance of focusing on history-in-person. Engaging in an understanding of history-in-persons compels us to recognize how groups of people in general, and individuals specifically, construct identities through their participation in the world. They argue that:

A focus on history-in-persons suggests that practices of identification are appropriated and transformed in local articulations of long-term struggles. Struggling points at the active engagement of identities and subjectivity in local practices 'finding the meaning of what is going on' (p.66).

Consequently, it is important, not only for young Chicanas but also for those within the larger social environment, to understand how individual and collective experiences are implicated in formation of minority subjectivities and how this impacts everyone. In other words, we have to contextualize and historicize people's lived experiences and how they make meaning of them. One way of creating a space in which Chicana students feel comfortable expressing themselves and making sense of their experiences in a pro-social setting is through the creation of school-based mentorship programs to provide group and individualized social and educational support. The importance of creating support groups is two-fold. First, creation of these programs may expose girls to positive role models who share a similar socio-cultural history. Chicanas involved in higher education could assist in exposing these girls to culturally important issues within a positive arena so that they do not form their identities through street socialization. Second, mentors may assist these girls to understand more career possibilities and how, through higher education, they may achieve their goals. Second, providing this type of outlet would not only allow girls to share their stories with, and

relate to, others who have had similar experiences outside of the gang milieu, but also allow them to understand their individual and collective histories within a social and cultural context.

“They don’t have the skills. They need the skills”: Creating options through career training

Beyond the classroom it is further necessary to connect schools with the communities in which they reside. Schools must acknowledge that educational issues must be acknowledged and addressed by macro and meso-level organizations and agencies. It is imperative that children and adolescents be connected to community agencies (such as the Boys and Girls Clubs), businesses, churches, faith-based organizations, and universities and community colleges so that schooling becomes a partnership with shared responsibility. The question here becomes one of how educators and invested community members can take advantage of the rich community resources that exist within the barrio. This helps, in essence, to incorporate students' cultural values, beliefs and socialization into the wider world around them as well as providing them the opportunity to imagine themselves with a future beyond the neighbourhood. Activities such as service-learning programs, which engage students in thinking beyond their own lives, help students to see and to understand that they do not stand apart from the community but are, rather, a necessary part of it.

Furthermore, it is necessary to provide these students with a comprehensive career education program that takes into account their particular interests and strengths rather than one which is determined by school officials. One of the more unique programs with a record of proven success is the Experience Based Career Education Program (Strandmark, Butram, & Blai, 1977) which can be implemented through the school or outside of it. This program allows students to explore a variety of careers and interests while also providing information about the structures that govern one's choices and may limit them. Generally speaking, students who live in low income neighbourhoods do not receive exposure to occupational choices nor to role models who can expose them to these choices and opportunities.

An all-inclusive career development program should examine work from a broad perspective, eliciting discussions about this nation's social, economic and political structures as well as providing a sense of respect for the dignity of all work. An Experience-Based Career Education Program generally provides exploration in five to six career areas, and within each of these areas, twelve to fifteen occupations from entry level positions to leadership ones within the organization. This type of program is experience-based, meaning that students learn how to do the work of each particular occupation. Students are allowed to pursue and engage in several occupations over a given period of time (three to six months). The goal is for each individual to identify some area of particular interest, and, then, with assistance, to develop a plan to meet that goal. This approach to career education not only fosters individual agency but also allows individuals to examine their own interests, abilities and plan for their futures in a realistic and self-directed manner. It further requires that participants write a personal reflective analysis of the explorations in which they participate. The final step in the program is to develop paid internships in the areas in which each student chooses his/her potential occupational interests. However, in order to make a program like this work, it requires school-business partnerships (W. Kolb, 2001).

**“Maybe more outreach. More outreach in the community”:
Individually-based services**

All of the individually-situated issues that young, gang-affiliated women tend to experience at high rates are interconnected and, as participants explained, their substance abuse is a means for escaping the daunting reality of past trauma, current stressors, and bleak futures. We know that the communities in which these women are raised are filled with challenges that lead to multiple marginalization (Vigil, 1988). Multiple marginality presents unique challenges within the barrio which have a cyclical effect on the individuals who reside within these communities. People within these areas are less likely to have formal education and more likely to live in poverty due limited occupational opportunities, single-parent homes, long work hours at low-wage jobs, and a greater number of children to provide for. These issues, coupled with limited resources to aid them and their children (transportation, occupational, or community-based), lead to overburdening parents and a subsequent loosening of coping skills (Vigil, 2007).

When parents are no longer able to maintain control of their children and are unable to access limited community-based or afterschool resources to occupy youths' time, the youth are more likely to spend time in the streets with other children who are bored and lack structure in their homes. As such, parents and children within these communities may benefit from services which meet their specific needs and provide them with resources, or at the very least, access to resources, that help alleviate some of their parental strain, teach proactive parenting, and create a community outlet where they can express their concerns.

All participants (with the exception of Diane) reported having struggled with substance abuse, which began during their adolescence. Participants reported that they often continued to get high throughout their mid to late 20s, and sometimes into their 30s. Participants were vocal that women in their communities were particularly susceptible to the lure of the streets and drugs, or "partying," which are an elemental part of that lifestyle. Women, they said, were more likely to have suffered from gendered violence and subsequent mental health problems and drug abuse was a means for coping with these historical and ongoing traumatic experiences. Participants unanimously expressed the need for more community-based outlets where girls could talk about their feelings and concerns, learn pro-social coping skills in order to effectively deal with their experiences and, most importantly, access drug prevention and intervention programs. While substance abuse was reported as a coping mechanism, it also cited as a way of life in the communities within which these women reside. Because they resided in drug-infested communities where "hanging out," "kicking it," and partying was part of the daily routine, the young girls' risk of being (re)victimized by their peers greatly increased (Miller, 2001).

Participants with children reported significant challenges maintaining effective control over their children because they were either heavily involved in the gang lifestyle or because they had to work long hours with no adult support. With the over-involvement of punitive, external agencies like DCFS in the lives of marginalized individuals (and particularly Latina/os), little is being done to actually address the root causes of child neglect so prevalent within these communities. Simply removing children from the homes, families, and communities with which they are familiar is an often ineffective

strategy that serves to further childhood trauma and mistrust of the system. Child removal should be a last resort. Governmental regulatory agencies impose stringent guidelines about what constitutes effective parenting; rules that are created based on a traditional, white, middle-class framework (Collins, 1994). It is imperative that these agencies take into account social, economic, political and cultural issues plaguing Chicana/os within these communities. With overburdened parents, who are unaware of internal and external resources necessary for effective parenting and with understimulated children who have little parental guidance in the home, these communities would greatly benefit from programming to address their specific needs. For example, these communities could greatly benefit from more city-based funding so that residents could collaborate and develop a parent support group. Because of their limited time, financial resources, and large households, parents need an arena in which they feel comfortable expressing their concerns, exchanging ideas about and collaborating on effective, culturally-relevant parenting strategies.

Parents also said that they often had to rely on their over-burdened, often elderly mothers or aunts to care for their children when they were attending their programs, in prison, or at work. During my tour of the Ramona Gardens housing projects, Little One proudly talked about the day-care centre located in the projects where she was raised and how it had served her community. However, her mood suddenly shifted when she revealed that the city had cut its funding, and day care hours were greatly decreased, meaning that the day care was no longer able to meet the needs of community members who often worked long, irregular hours. Parenting support groups are important in order to help parents feel less isolated, but parents also need support when they have to fulfill obligations outside of the home. Individuals within these communities would greatly benefit from the creation of local, subsidized day-cares with extended hours in order to meet community members' needs. Creating more day cares not only would alleviate strain on parents but also would create a safe environment for children where their social, physical, emotional, needs might be met. In addition to serving parents and children alike, these programs also might create more jobs for community members.

Retrospectively, participants were able to vocalize their individual, familial, and community-based needs. They acknowledged there were few resources available within

their communities and that they were unaware of the resources that were available to them during their adolescence. They expressed the need for agencies and organizations to reach out to young Chicanas in order to deter them from the difficulties inherent in gang life. Education initiatives, like tutoring and mentoring, skills training, job preparation, transportation, gang diversion/prevention programs, and drug rehabilitation programs, were all cited in terms of participants' needs. In addition, participants recognized that their involvement in the gang lifestyle had compounded their initial problems, and they often faced additional challenges in their young adulthood as a result. They reported a need for assistance with community reintegration (upon release from jail or prison), filing restraining orders against abusive partners, applying for public assistance, gang-tattoo removal to alleviate the stigma of gang involvement, as well as things often taken for granted by others such as assistance obtaining Social Security card, driver's license, and completing their GEDs.

Programs like Homeboy Industries and Legacy LA, located in East LA, were created specifically to meet the community's needs. For example, Homeboy Industries assists young men and women to access the aforementioned resources and provides them with a safe space in which to receive the services and treatment they need. Legacy, a smaller, community-based organization, offers a variety of programs to at-risk and gang-affiliated individuals to deter them from "kicking it" in their neighbourhoods. Some of their programs foster an environment where youth can weigh in on issues affecting their own community, learn about socially and politically relevant issues, and allow them a voice to express how their experiences have impacted them and shaped their outlooks. In addition, they offer a student mentoring/tutoring program, and the Live Your Legacy Program, which includes gang-intervention initiatives like therapy, skills building, and a book club. However, many participants said that they were not aware of programs available to them within the community. This suggests that, as Kimberly stated, outreach is essential.

One of the major problem facing young women within these communities is that government funding is not being allocated and collaboration is not being fostered for evidence-based programs that actually work and help create more functional communities. Punitive efforts, like Gang Task forces and Civil Gang Injunctions (CGIs),

do little to actually address the root causes of problems that afflict communities like East LA, and this, in turn, creates and sustains a fertile breeding ground for anger, hopelessness, boredom, and helplessness. Throughout the interviews participants consistently reported “not giving a fuck” about their lives or the lives of others during their gang-banging days. They felt helpless to affect change in their lives and hopeless about their futures. Denying at-risk youth the services necessary to enhance their lives and encouraging them to be contributing members of society only reinforces their despair and the likelihood that they will not be able to exit the discouraging cycle in which they are so entwined. With that, I echo Vigil (2007), “while ‘fixing’ individuals is important in its own right, we should also consider ‘fixing’ the social and familial contexts of society as well” (p. 199).

Strengths

The current research employed unstructured, qualitative interviews in order to elicit rich and descriptive information about participants’ lived experiences. This method was useful because it allowed participants to express the issues in their lives that they felt were noteworthy in terms of their understanding of self. While there is a plethora of research on women in gangs, particularly within the past two decades, there remains an absence of literature that explores the construction of identity for and among gang-affiliated girls and women (for exceptions, see Campbell, 1984; Mendoza-Denton, 2008; Miller, 2001; Miranda 2003; Schalet et al., 2003). Miller’s (2001) study has been particularly helpful in informing our understanding of the identity politics at play among young, gang-affiliated women; however, her sample primarily focuses on the experiences of African American girls in a relatively newly-established, gang city. While gang-affiliated Chicanas in East LA have been the focus of other research (see, for example, Harris, 1988, 1994; Mendoza-Denton, 2008; Moore, 1991, Moore & Hagedorn, 1999; Quicker, 1999; Vigil, 2008), the current project contributes to our understanding by focusing on the unique role of culture, social interaction, space, and time inherent in the process of identity formation.

This project adds to the current literature on both gangs and identity politics by employing an intersectional framework in order to address three major nexuses at which

identity for the participants is (re)constructed: (1) intra-gang relations; (2) prison relationships; and (3) disengagement from the gang. Through their narratives, participants relayed how they constructed themselves as insiders/outside within their own social milieus, and this aids our understanding of how marginalized people are both constrained by larger systemic issues but also work to push against them and exert a sense of agency. It is this sense of agency that allows them to make sense, at least in part, of their lives. While it is clear that these women—more so than their non-marginalized counterparts—face struggles and challenges unique to their social and cultural positioning, their individual and collective narratives critically shed light upon the very real, lived experiences of Chicanas residing in the barrios of East LA.

In addition to illuminating issues inherent in the entry into, performance and disengagement from gangs, this project allowed participants the space to provide their insight into how communities and individuals alike can and should address the issue of gang membership. Similar to other studies, data showed that gang membership is a multifaceted issue that stems from multiple systemic factors. While certain individuals may be more likely to join a gang, participants explained what types of community-based resources are necessary, in their minds, to deter youth from this lifestyle.

As a former, bi-lingual (Spanish-English) clinician who worked closely with the Latina/o community in East LA, I believe that I was able to help foster a safe space for participants' voices to be heard. At times participants struggled to recount their stories because they were overwhelmed by emotion. Interestingly, some participants expressed their gratitude for being allowed to share their stories having never had the opportunity to share them in the past. Throughout the process, I was careful not to discount certain narratives even when inconsistencies arose because the stories themselves were simply too important and because it allowed participants to share individual and/or collective stories that they perceived as relevant to them and their communities. Participants made it clear that they understood the issues that plagued their communities and affected them and their families. The interviews, they said, allowed them an outlet through which they could share their stories and do their part to contribute to our knowledge about women involved in gangs. It was their hope that their contribution would be heard and that their and suggestions would be taken seriously in order to aid other young women in

their struggle on the streets. Out of respect, I hope to continue the social justice-based tradition of democratizing research by privileging individual and community voice and, thereby, avoid the tendency of research to become lost within the academy.

Future Research

This study presents important findings, and its implications not only contribute to the extant literature but can also aid all of us in implementing policy measures at various levels. This study reflects issues deemed important by participants from a small demographic. Are these issues consistent for gang-affiliated women across different socio-economic groups and in different locations? For example, this project shines light on important issues facing Chicanas in gangs in East LA. Future research might examine how their experiences mirror or differ from experiences of Latinas and Chicanas in different gangs as well as in other locations. Are women involved in the Salvadoran gang, MS-13, exposed to the same experiences or construct their identities differently than their Chicana counterparts? How does locality and historicity of the gang itself and its breeding ground play a role in intra-gang dynamics?

With heightening social, political, and economic concerns surrounding recent U.S/Mexico immigration, we should concern ourselves with how these matters are responsible for producing and reproducing gangs and gang activity. How are gang dynamics and identity production for young women, caught in the cross-fire of these political issues, impacted? Investigation of gang dynamics closer to the U.S/Mexico border could shed light on similar issues but with the added dimension of immigration. What issues may these women face now and in the future, and does location play a role in needs and experiences? These areas tend to be even more riddled with poverty, violence, and general disorder associated with drug cartel activity. Some of the data from these interviews suggested there may be some link between low-level Chicano/a street gangs and more organized criminal activity. How might these two types of organizations be linked? How might these differing external social circumstances impact women's understanding of their roles and experiences in their lives?

Finally, it is important that we continue to reflect upon and address the issue of agency among marginalized women. Through their narratives, participants explained how they were limited by structural inequalities, but they also pushed against those structures that they believed constrained them. How can proactive empowerment be fostered for, by, and, among women in these communities in a pro-social (as opposed to gang-related) context? Participatory Action-based Research (PAR) research, conducted through collaboration with academics, activists, and community members in order to develop community-based groups and co-operatives, could work to foster a sense of agency among women. Collective development and implementation of these types of programs could further lead to a democratic process in which everyone's voice is heard.

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Appendix

Study information and informed consent

Participant Information Sheet

My name is Abby Kolb and you are being asked to participate in a study that looks at how women get involved in gangs, the roles that they place in gangs and what it means to them, what leads women to make the decision to want to leave the gang, how they go about doing so, and what all this means in terms of their sense of identity. The study is being supervised by Dr. Ted Palys of Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada, and will contribute to some of his ongoing research as well as to my doctoral dissertation in criminology.

You are being asked to participate in an open-ended interview that will probably last about two hours. I have a few questions that I want to make sure I ask, but really would prefer for you to do most of the talking. If you agree to participate, the questions will focus on what led you to become involved with a gang in the first place, about your role in the gang, about how a woman shows her gang membership and role within it, what led you to try and leave the gang, and the challenges you face in doing that. Unless you indicate otherwise, I think a good way for us to start would be with what led you to becoming involved with the gang in the first place, and then we could go on from there.

Anything you tell me will remain strictly confidential as to your identity. The information you share with me will be pooled together with information that other women tell me and become the basis for my dissertation and articles or books or conference presentations, but you will never be referred to by name, and any other information that you share that might identify you will be deleted or changed to make sure you remain unidentifiable. If you agree to participate, I will ask you to supply a pseudonym (fake name) that I will use for you, or will assign one if you have no preference.

I hope you will allow me to record the interview with a digital recorder. It helps me because then I can devote much better attention to you, and it also ensures that I can make sure I am getting the information accurately. If at any point you'd like me to turn off

the recorder for any reason, I will do so. And if there are any questions that I ask that you would prefer not to answer, then feel free not to. You can also withdraw from the research completely at any point. I will use the tape to make a transcript of the interview with all identifying information removed, and then will destroy the tape.

The study has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board at Simon Fraser University. If you have any questions or concerns about the research process, please contact my faculty supervisor, Dr. Ted Palys, at [...], or Dr. Hal Weinberg, Director, Office of Research Ethics, at [...]. If you have any questions now I would be happy to answer them, and if you have any after I leave you can contact me at [...].

Do you consent to participate in this interview? Yes ____ No ____

Do you consent to have this interview recorded? Yes ____ No ____