

Running head: NARRATIVES OF GANG DESISTANCE

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Narratives of gang desistance amongst former gang members

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University of Cape Town

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## **ABSTRACT**

Gangs are found all over the world, including South Africa. In Cape Town specifically, gang involvement is a critical problem in need of intervention. Despite this, little research has explored the perspectives of former gang members on leaving and staying out of the gang. Understanding how and why individuals desist from gangs has important implications for policymakers, the criminal justice system, and in the development of effective interventions, which is particularly important in low- and middle-income countries like South Africa, where very little is known about desistance from gangs, and where economic and other conditions that may lead to gang involvement are different from those in high-income countries.

Drawing on a narrative theoretical framework as well as the theory of critical realism, this research sought to examine how former South African gang members understand and make sense of their desistance from gang involvement, focusing on exiting the gang life as well as maintaining a reformed lifestyle after exiting, despite the challenges this may present. Two rounds of life history interviews were conducted with twelve former gang members from a Cape Town community with a high prevalence of gangsterism. Thematic narrative analysis was used to analyse the interview data. Findings revealed that the participants' narratives of desistance focused on a profound transformation in identity in which they moved away from the hardened, stoic gangster identity and embraced a more prosocial identity, such as that of a positive role model in the community. This transformation was a process punctuated with key turning points (such as incarceration or becoming religious) that prompted active reflection on the gang life and contributed to their decision to desist. The participants' narratives also focused on their agency in the desistance process, which included forming a purposive intention to change their lives, committing to and maintaining this change, in spite of challenges they faced (for example, a relapse into drugs), taking personal responsibility for their pasts and striving for more independence in the future. Importantly, it also involved actively drawing on protective resources (such as meaningful and practical support from loved ones and religious belief systems) and prosocial identities (for example, being a caring husband and father) available to them within their environments, thus illustrating how the desistance process is an interaction between inner and outer resources. Therefore, it is imperative that interventions that assist desisting gangsters are targeted not only on an individual level, but a contextual level too, ensuring that individuals have access to the kinds of resources in their environment that will support their desistance.

**DECLARATION**

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy to the Department of Psychology at the University of Cape Town, Cape Town. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in this or any other University.

Signature: .....JF Kelly..... Date: ...28 September 2018.....

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## CHAPTER ONE: THE CONTEXT OF GANGS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Gangs are found in many countries all over the world, including South Africa (Petrus, 2013). While it is difficult to determine accurately the prevalence of gang membership in South Africa, in the 1990s it was estimated that the number of gangs in the Cape Flats<sup>1</sup> area of the Western Cape was 130 (Standing, 2005) with 80,000 to 120,000 gang members (Kinnes, 2000). In 2001 the overall population of the city of Cape Town was 2,892,243 (Statistics South Africa, 2015); thus approximately 2.77 to 4.15 percent of the population may have been involved in a gang. Similarly, the prevalence of gang members in the United States in 2010 was estimated to be two percent (Pyrooz & Sweeten, 2015), while in 2013 it was reported that one percent of 18-34 year old men were gang members in Britain (Coid et al., 2013). Some gangs in Cape Town have become particularly large; for instance, it is believed that the Americans<sup>2</sup> gang in the Cape Flats has 5,000 members (Standing, 2005).

One of the difficulties in gang research is in defining a gang (Cooper & Ward, 2012; Esbensen, Winfree, He, & Taylor, 2001; Petrus, 2013). Some gangs are groups of young people who “hang out” together, who may commit minor acts of delinquency together, and possibly be drawn into illicit activities. Other gangs, at least in South Africa, follow a more formal structure and are run by adults who recruit young people to be members (Cooper & Ward, 2012). Often these more formal gangs have links to organised crime (Cooper & Ward, 2012). In terms of definitions available in the literature, the Eurogang Network of Research defines a street gang as “any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity” (Weerman et al., 2009, p. 20). The National Gang Centre in the United States reports that the key defining characteristic of a gang is group criminality, followed by having a gang name, displaying colours or symbols, “hanging out” together, claiming ownership over territory and having a leader or leaders (National Gang Centre, 2017). One definition of a gang widely used in South Africa, and instantiated in law, is similar to that of the Eurogang project and National Gang Centre: Chapter 1 of the Prevention of Organised Crime Act (POCA) No. 121 of 1998 defines a criminal gang as:

[A]ny formal or informal ongoing organisation, association, or group of three or more persons, which has as one of its activities the commission of one or more criminal offences, which has an identifiable name or identifying sign or symbol, and whose

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<sup>1</sup> The Cape Flats is a vast low-lying flat area in Cape Town, South Africa, to which people classified as Coloured and black African were relocated by the apartheid government during the forced removals of the 1950s and 1960s. Many of South Africa’s gangs operate here (Petrus, 2013; Pinnock, 2016). A more detailed discussion on the Cape Flats can be found in section 1.2.

<sup>2</sup> The Americans gang is a street gang and organised crime group in the Cape Flats (Standing, 2003a).

members individually or collectively engage in or have engaged in a pattern of criminal gang activity.

Kinnes (2000), a leading expert on gangs in South Africa, argues that while there is no single definition that can adequately describe gangs, there are certain key considerations of gangs, based on existing definitions that can be formulated:

- Members of gangs may range in age from youngsters (what Pinnock (1984), another leading scholar on gangs, called “corner kids”) to adults between the ages of 20 and 40 years.
- The social context of gangs generally determines their nature and activities.
- Gangs may include persons both inside and outside of jails.
- Gang members may range from those who operate on the street to those who lead criminal syndicates.
- Gangs may participate in criminal activities as a means of survival, or they may be more structured criminal organisations.

In the sections that follow in this chapter I provide a brief outline of this thesis before moving on to review the literature on gangsterism.

### **1.1 Outline of thesis**

This study is about desistance from gang membership and gang activities in South Africa. In order to contextualise this topic, I begin by providing an overview of the literature on gangs, focusing on the nature and history of gangs in South Africa, the nature and impact of gangs on gang members and the wider community, and the process of gang joining.

Chapter Two focuses on desistance from gang involvement and criminality as well as resilience in the context of gangsterism and crime more generally. Chapter Three provides a description of narrative and critical realism theory, and how these can be used in studying desistance from gang involvement. In Chapter Four I discuss the research methods and procedures of this study, and provide a rationale for the chosen design. Chapters Five and Six present the findings of this study – identity transformation and leaving the gang and maintaining reform, respectively. I conclude with Chapter Seven which presents summaries and implications of the findings, as well as suggestions for future research.

I now turn to my review of the literature on gangsterism, beginning with an account of gangs in South Africa.

## 1.2 Gangs in South Africa

Gangs in South Africa have a unique and complex history, shaped and influenced by the socio-political context of apartheid and its legacy. In the sections that follow I explore the effects of the apartheid system on gangsterism, the role a certain form of coloured<sup>3</sup> and masculine identity has played and continues to play in gang involvement, the nature of street and prison gangs in South Africa, and finally, state and other responses to dealing with gangsterism.

While there are black gang members and all-black gangs in South Africa (Kinnes, 2017), the gang phenomenon is largely seen as a particular feature of coloured communities in Cape Town (Petrus, 2013, 2015a), and in my study I focused on coloured ex-gangsters. Thus, in my review of the literature below I focus on coloured gangs.

### 1.2.1 The effects of the apartheid system on gangs in South Africa

Gangs in South Africa have a long history, beginning in the early twentieth century (Standing, 2006). For instance, the mining compounds in the Witwatersrand were described as being “plagued” by gangs in the 1920s and 1930s (Kynoch, 1999, p. 57). However, it is generally well accepted that gangsterism burgeoned as a result of the discriminatory practices of the apartheid system; in particular, the forced removals of the 1950s and 1960s (Luyt & Foster, 2001; Petrus, 2015a; Samara, 2011; Standing, 2006). The Population Registration Act No. 30 of 1950 required that all South African citizens be classified and registered on the basis of their race. The four racial categories defined by apartheid legislation were African/black, coloured, white and Indian/Asian. The Group Areas Act No. 41 of 1950 enforced the systematised segregation of these race groups through assigning the races to different geographic locations. White South Africans were assigned the largest and best resourced areas in the country, while African, coloured and Indian South Africans were forcibly relocated to less desirable areas (Salo, 2007b), mostly on the Cape Flats (the low-lying area that surrounds Table Mountain in Cape Town; Pinnock, 2016).

According to Pinnock (1984; whose work is seminal to understanding gangs in the Cape Flats) youth crime in inner-city areas of Cape Town before apartheid was, for the most part, kept under control by parents, neighbours and extended family networks. However, due

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<sup>3</sup> Coloured (mixed race origin) refers to one of four race groups defined under the apartheid government in South Africa (African/black, coloured, white, and Asian/Indian). I make note of these categorisations here not because I endorse them (I do not), but because of continuing inequality across the races in terms of – for example - employment, housing and access to adequate health care and education (Barbarin & Richter, 2013).

to the forced removals, inhabitants of these inner-city areas were dispersed over the Cape Flats as individual families, as opposed to entire neighbourhoods, were relocated to different areas. This resulted in the loss of many extended family networks (and thus, adult supervision), as well as a breakdown in the stability of families. This is evidenced by high divorce rates and an increase in single motherhood, as well as increasing strain between youngsters and their fathers, brought on by men's feelings of incompetence in their new environment, likely given that their employment was stifled - residents were no longer close enough to their sources of employment and transport was not arranged from the Cape Flats to their places of work in the city centre (Pinnock, 1984). Pinnock (1984) argues that it was in this context, where the home environment was tumultuous and unstructured and a sense of community and social growth was hindered, that gangs formed and grew in the Cape Flats (Mthembu, 2015; Pinnock, 1984; Samara, 2011; Standing, 2006). The isolation that resulted from the forced removals left youngsters with little choice but "to build something coherent out of the one thing they had left – each other" (Pinnock, 1984, p. 54). The introduction of the highly addictive drug, Mandrax (Methaqualone), to the Western Cape in the 1970s further entrenched the gangs in the local economy and Cape Flats communities, as gangs began to sell the drug (Samara, 2011).

A related problem of the forced removals was that the family structure of coloured families in the home environment, which most often includes grandparents and extended family networks, was not taken into account when the apartheid government built low-cost housing in areas like the Cape Flats. This resulted in severe overcrowding in living spaces. Space therefore became a sought-after commodity, and young boys – according to Pinnock (1984) - opted to play on the streets instead of at home where personal space was limited, forming groups to monitor and protect the self-invented boundaries they set up. Pinnock (1984) argues that many of these adolescent play groups ("corner kids") eventually advanced into defence gangs (a group of youth who would defend a particular territory) as a result of an increased demand for commodities and the resultant need to defend these commodities (Mthembu, 2015; Pinnock, 1984)

However, scholars like Glaser (2000) argue that the relationship between the forced removals and gang formation may not be altogether clear-cut. He purports that while the social disorganisation resulting from the forced relocations may have led to an increase in crime, gangs do not flourish in this sort of environment, but rather in communities that are more settled. According to Glaser (2000) the defence gangs of the Cape Flats that Pinnock (1984) concentrated on only came into existence many years after the height of the

relocations (Standing, 2006). However, Glaser's (2000) claim is difficult to substantiate in the context of the Cape Flats given that the formation of communities on the Flats was a fluid process, starting well before apartheid and then growing in the 1960s and 1970s, with many families moving multiple times before settling in a neighbourhood. It seems impossible, therefore, to know with any certainty when exactly settled communities emerged (Standing, 2006; and thus, defence gangs formed), but there is general consensus that apartheid and forced removals played a key role in their formation.

Another key factor in the growth of gangsterism during (and after) apartheid was the materially and socially deprived conditions of the townships<sup>4</sup> and the failure of the state to provide basic services, which contributed to individuals coming together as groups in order to gain control over territory and income-generating activities (Kynoch, 1999; Petrus, 2013). In this context gangs provided social and economic capital to whole communities (Salo, 2007a). For example, in the Cape Flats it has been estimated that the gangs provided an income for 100,000 people through illicit activities - sometimes paying for the electricity and water bills of whole neighbourhoods - thereby fostering economic interdependence between gangs and communities and establishing an acceptance of criminal behaviour (Kynoch, 1999). Further, gangs often played – and continue to play - a role in the social organisation of communities by, for instance, upholding an informal system of township justice, and assuming control of the provision of resource and services (Petrus, 2013; Salo, 2007a). Thus, gangs in the Cape Flats help families and communities cope with otherwise almost impossible socioeconomic conditions (Petrus, 2013).

From the mid-1980s to the end of apartheid in 1994, the political turmoil of the time provided an ideal context for gangs to reorganise. During the 1980s popular protest by South Africans against the apartheid regime was at its height and the government responded with extreme repression (Kynoch, 1999; Samara, 2011). Gangs took advantage of this chaotic time, justifying their criminal activities as political activism and also engaging in warfare for warring protest political groups. Police action at the time also contributed to the flourishing of gangsterism, as gang members were offered police protection in return for acting as informants (Kynoch, 1999). Further, available evidence suggests that the gangs in actual fact aligned themselves with *both* the liberation movement and the apartheid government. For example, according to reports of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, members of the

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<sup>4</sup> In South Africa the term “township” refers to underdeveloped and largely impoverished areas, usually built on the periphery of towns and cities that, during apartheid, were reserved for black people. The Cape Flats area included a number of townships.

Americans gang of the Cape Flats assisted the apartheid government in fighting the African National Congress (ANC)<sup>5</sup> (Kinnes, 2017).

But it was in 1994 (when the first democratic elections took place) that the political uncertainty and the relaxation of tight state control in communities and on borders, provided fertile ground for a significant growth in crime and gangsterism (Kinnes, 2000; Standing, 2005; Van Wyk & Theron, 2005). South Africa's negotiated transition into a democracy, and the reconfiguring of its relationship to the global economy, provided an opportunity for gangs to grow, through the diversification of their illicit activities and forming of partnerships with legitimate business (largely to launder money; Samara, 2011). Further, the opening of South African borders allowed for international crime syndicates to penetrate the South African market and exposed local criminal organisations to the global economy, resulting in a significant change in the structure and activities of gangs (Samara, 2011). The street gangs of the Cape Flats no longer only consisted of groups of youngsters who came together to defend the community from rival gangs. Rather, many of these gangs developed into criminal empires that were highly structured and organised (Kinnes, 2000).

However, while this transitional period provided many opportunities for the gangs to flourish, it was by no means the only contributor to their growth. The decade that preceded the transition into a democracy was also a time of political and economic instability, providing a context in which gangs could reorganise. Thus, it is likely that the growth of the gangs on the Cape Flats from the mid to late 1990s was as much a result of this earlier period as it was a consequence of the transitional period (Samara, 2011). Further, as discussed above, the first major period of growth for the gangs (and the origins thereof) was during the time of the forced removals. Thus, the growth and development of the gangs happened in different stages: first during the removals of the 1950s and 1960s, then during the violence of the 1980s, and again during the transition to democracy in the 1990s. Common to each of these time periods is the economic, social and political disorder and instability, through which gangs were able to adapt and change (Samara, 2011). Thus, street gangs in the Cape Flats are best understood as being fluid and dynamic in character, changing and adapting according to their context (Kinnes, 2000; Petrus, 2013).

The increase in organisation and sophistication of street gangs can also be linked to the continuing marginalisation and exclusion of coloured communities post-apartheid (Petrus,

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<sup>5</sup> The ANC is the governing social democratic political party in South Africa. It was a leading movement in the fight against apartheid.

2013). This, along with a more general discussion of the coloured (masculine) identity and its role in gangsterism (both during and after apartheid), will be the focus of the following section.

### **1.2.2 Coloured (masculine) identity**

The coloured identity has a complex history. It was first spoken about in the context of the interaction between the white Dutch and British colonists, black slaves from South and East India and East Africa, and the conquered Khoi and San people who were indigenous to the Cape. Coloured persons were seen as those who had one white parent (a Dutch or British colonist) and one black parent (a slave or Khoi or San person; Erasmus, 2001). The apartheid – and before that, colonial – system positioned the coloured ethnicity as midway between black and white, thus framing it as a residual and in-between identity (Erasmus, 2001; Mthembu, 2015; Salo, 2007a). Indeed the Population Registration Act No. 30 of 1950 defined a coloured person as “not a white person or a native” (Erasmus, 2001, p. 18). Therefore, coloured people occupied “an imagined middle ground” (Standing, 2006, p. 30) between white people – who had control and ownership of everything – and black people, who had nothing and were feared and kept at bay (Standing, 2006). In contemporary South Africa, a commonly heard complaint by some coloured people is that under the apartheid government they were not seen as “white enough” and under the new democratic government they are “not black enough” to have full access to resources associated with the dominant group (Adhikari, 2006; Petrus, 2013, p. 76).

The coloured identity is also described by theorists as dynamic and fluid and as being “steeped in ambiguity” (Petrus & Isaacs-Martin, 2012, p. 87). It has also been framed as a lesser or inferior identity, often associated with drunkenness and jollity as well as criminality, violence and gangsterism, and thus marginalised and trivialised (Erasmus, 2001; Jensen, 2006; Mthembu, 2015; Petrus, 2013; Samara, 2011). As a result, “for many coloured people in South Africa the search for identity, belonging and rootedness remains an unresolved issue” (Petrus, 2013, pp. 76-77). Arguably, one way in which this sense of identity, belonging and rootedness can be achieved is through gangsterism (Jensen, 2008; Kinnes, 2017; Petrus, 2013).

While on the one hand the street gang reinforces the stereotype of coloured males being “skollies” (South African slang for thugs) and thus can contribute to the marginalisation of the coloured identity, the gang may also provide – contradictorily - a means by which an identity can be formed and belonging can be found (Jensen, 2008; Petrus,

2013). The street gang can function as a social mechanism of identity construction through acting as a symbol of resistance to the externally imposed coloured identity by the apartheid government. This “externally created ethnic boundary” (Petrus & Isaacs-Martin, 2012, p. 93) had a range of implications for coloured people, including producing feelings of inferiority and marginalisation. Being in a gang offered coloured youth a means by which they could resist this marginal and inferior status, and thereby challenge the meanings associated with the externally imposed coloured identity (Petrus, 2013). Indeed it is through the gang that youth – in particular male youth - can garner a sense of respect, power and brotherhood (Burnett, 1999; MacMaster, 2010; Petrus, 2013).

This draws on the notion of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity can be understood as a set of practices that legitimizes men’s dominant position in society over women, and over other marginalised ways of being a man. A fundamental feature of the concept is that there is a plurality and hierarchy of masculinities (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Importantly, the concept should not be seen as a set of traits that define a particular form of masculinity. Rather, “it refers to a dynamic social process whereby specific ideals and fantasies affect the way real men and boys are influenced in terms of what is considered to be a desirable gendered identity” (Cooper, 2009, p. 3; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In addition, evidence also suggests that masculinities are mediated by social, cultural and historical factors. For instance, in contemporary Western working-class communities, masculine characteristics such as strength, assertiveness and competitiveness are valued (Deuchar, Søgaard, Kolind, Thylstrup, & Wells, 2016, 2016).

When legitimate ways of validating one’s masculinity are unavailable to young men and boys (perhaps as a result of disadvantaged social backgrounds or a lack of opportunities for employment), the gang can provide an arena in which men are able to display manly attributes and thus reinforce their hegemonic masculine identity (Deuchar et al., 2016; Deuchar & Weide, 2018; Luyt & Foster, 2001; Messerschmidt, 1997). Indeed a common way in which young men, particularly within working class communities, can achieve a desired masculine status is through violent behaviour and crime (Deuchar & Weide, 2018). As Carlsson (2013, p. 662) notes: to “do crime” is to “do masculinity” (Deuchar et al., 2016). When these oppositional expressions of masculinity are valued, this may serve to normalise violence and contribute to membership of gangs as they provide a context for such violence (Deuchar et al., 2016; White, 2013).

Thus, gang membership can be seen as a way in which hegemonic masculine identity can be asserted (MacMaster, 2007; Salo, 2007a). In their study on hegemonic masculinity in

gang culture in Cape Town, Luyt and Foster (2001) found that young men who lived in areas where there was pervasive gang activity endorsed notions of masculinity connected to toughness, success and control.

Situating this in a historical South African context: During apartheid, the impact of the Coloured Labour Preference Policy in the Western Cape coupled with the feminisation of the labour force in the textile industry led to coloured women – as opposed to men – being the preferred workers (Salo, 2007a). Thus, more women were employed, and were also given state housing and welfare grants, increasing their power in the household and community (Mthembu, 2015). Coloured men in post-apartheid South Africa continue – to a large extent – to be excluded from the labour market given, among other factors, their low levels of education and continued marginalisation (MacMaster, 2007; Salo, 2003). The unemployment rate for coloured people in the third quarter of 2017 was reported to be 24 percent, and more than 30 percent of young coloured persons were not in employment, education or training in the third quarter of the year (Statistics South Africa, 2017a). As a result, for coloured men who are not able to affirm their hegemonic masculine identity as breadwinners, gangsterism provided an alternative (MacMaster, 2007; Salo, 2003).

Having provided a socio-political framework within which to understand gangs in South Africa, I now turn to a discussion of the nature of gangs themselves, including street and prison gangs.

### **1.2.3 Street and prison gangs**

As noted above in section 1.2.1, the structure of street gangs in the Cape Flats began to change after the 1994 democratic elections, largely as a result of the changing political, economic and social landscape, as well as the globalisation of organised crime (Petrus, 2013, 2015a). Street gangs were no longer seen as predominantly local groups of youth who would “hang out” on the streets. Many of them developed into highly organised and structured entities (Kinnes, 2000; Petrus, 2013).

While there are no available statistics on the prevalence of gang membership in South Africa, it was estimated in the 1990s that there are roughly 130 gangs in the Cape Flats, with 80,000 to 100,000 members (Kinnes, 2000; Standing, 2003a, 2005). There is a substantial amount of variety in the structure and characteristics of these numerous gangs which may be best understood as lying on a continuum based on longevity, size and power (Standing, 2003a). On the one end are what Standing (2003a, 2003b) – a leading scholar on gangs in South Africa – calls primary gangs, and on the other, emerging gangs. According to Standing

(2003b) these gangs form the base of the criminal economy on the Cape Flats, and are led by what he calls the criminal elites – a group of approximately 10 to 20 men who claim to have power over different areas, or criminal domains, in the Flats.

The criminal elite usually originate from the Cape Flats, own property there and have ties to the community, but tend to live in the more affluent areas of Cape Town. Most of them get to their position by rising through the ranks of the street gangs, but may not remain gang members once they have joined the criminal elite. They gain their personal fortunes through controlling the criminal economy; most notably the distribution and sale of alcohol and drugs, as well as prostitution, the export and sale of stolen cars and firearms, and the theft of goods from factories and warehouses. Usually these illicit activities are accompanied by legitimate businesses including hotels, public transport, night clubs, shops and garages. The criminal elites rely on partnerships with corrupt members of state (including police, judges and politicians) as well as professionals such as lawyers and business consultants who help them to protect and grow their illicit fortunes (Standing, 2003b).

The base of each of these criminal domains is made up of numerous street gangs who reside in particular territories or “tursts” (Salo, 2007b; Standing, 2003b). Usually these are comprised of young people, but all age groups are present, with older members probably being less active (Standing, 2003b). The primary gangs, like the Americans and the Hard Livings, are the larger gangs in the Cape Flats with a membership of several thousand each (Standing, 2003a). These gangs are governed by an elaborate hierarchy. At the top are the few men who make up the criminal elite. Beneath them are the area generals who are in charge of the gang members in lower ranks. The generals are considered the middlemen in the organisation. They mobilise members when there is gang conflict and run local business interests, including the selling of drugs, moving of stolen goods and running of unlicensed drinking places. Below the area generals are the majority of gang members, most of whom are non-skilled and have no direct connection with the upper tier of the criminal domain (and thus do not profit off their trade; Standing, 2003a, 2003b). Most of these members never rise into the top tiers of the hierarchy of the gang (Pinnock, 2016), though some of them are employed for special purposes; for instance, as bodyguards, assassins and intelligence officers (Standing, 2003a, 2003b). In order to be initiated into the gang, members are usually required to commit a rape or murder of a rival gangster. They are also required to “take a tjappie” or “chappie” (gang slang for getting a tattoo) of the gang in order to be considered an official member (Pinnock, 2016; Salo, 2007a). Getting a specific tattoo of the gang, along

with a particular dress code and slang, works towards a shared culture amongst members (Standing, 2003a).

Below the primary gangs on the Cape Flats there are a number of smaller gangs (what Standing, 2003a calls emerging gangs) that develop and die out on a frequent basis (Pinnock, 2016; Standing, 2003a). Most of these gangs last as long as their founding members, some consisting of no more than ten individuals. Some, however, go on to form an alliance with the primary gangs, usually in order to acquire protection, weaponry and drugs. In return, the smaller gang is expected to support the primary gang in times of conflict. Some emerging gangs evolve into mid-sized gangs by expanding their territory through successful gang fights or though merging with other gangs. The dense allegiances between the smaller emerging gangs, mid-sized gangs and the larger gangs means that even a small conflict can spark a gang fight between numerous gangs and quickly escalate to a gang war (Standing, 2003a, 2003b).

Community members in the Cape Flats are exposed to gang violence on a regular basis (Mncube & Steinmann, 2014; Reckson & Becker, 2005). Much of this violence has to do with drug-related turf wars as gangs compete with one another in order to control the sale of drugs in particular areas (Petrus, 2015b; Pinnock, 2016). Along with being victims of gang violence, community residents are often reliant on the criminal economy of gangs, largely as a result of the high unemployment rates in the Cape Flats. Gang leaders are known to provide money for rent, food and domestic bills, as well as to provide financial support to schools and sport teams (Samara, 2011; Standing, 2003b). For example, community members in Manenberg (a suburb in the Cape Flats) noted that gang leaders functioned as providers in the community by providing goods (such as food and clothing), employing residents and investing in the community (by, for instance, building religious centres; Lambrechts, 2012). Further, gang leaders often fulfil obligations that are traditionally meant to be the responsibility of the state (Standing, 2003b).

The channelling of state funds into white areas during apartheid left areas such as the Cape Flats with inadequate infrastructure (including housing, schools and hospitals) and derelict communal areas. While the government has made some strides in redistributing wealth, the impact of this can, at best, be described as modest. Further, much of the focus of government in the Cape Flats is on establishing law and order in light of rampant gang violence and crime (Standing, 2003b). It is in this context that the criminal elite perform some of the functions of the state, including, for example, brokering peace during times of

conflict between gangs, local businesses and community residents, as well as assisting residents with their grievances and perceived injustices (Standing, 2003b).

Along with street gangs, prison based gangs are a common phenomenon in Cape Town; particularly the Numbers gang (Peacock & Theron, 2007), which will be discussed below.

### **1.2.3.1 The Numbers gang**

The Numbers gang, which has been in existence for over a hundred years, is considered the most powerful collection of prison gangs in South Africa (Lindegard & Gear, 2014; Steinberg, 2004). Its origin can be traced back to the Ninevites, a bandit group that emerged in the late 1800s amongst black mineworkers in Johannesburg. The Ninevites were no longer active in communities by the 1930s due to the arrest of its leadership, but they migrated into the South African prison system and began imposing a new order on the inmates (Standing, 2006; Steinberg, 2004). Beginning in the 1950s and over the next few decades the number of imprisoned coloured men – particularly in the Western Cape where most of them were living - began to steadily increase: “in 1980, for every 100,000 of each racial group, 729 coloureds were in prison compared with 362 Africans, 81 whites and 57 Asians” (Pinnock, 1984; Standing, 2006, p. 15). The brutal and oppressive conditions of these institutions, in particular the massive overcrowding, provided an ideal setting for the Numbers gang to flourish (Standing, 2006; Steinberg, 2004). What started as the Ninevites in the prison system split into three gangs: the 26s, the 27s and the 28s, collectively known as the Numbers (Standing, 2006). Historically, the Numbers gang identifies as oppositional to the colonial and apartheid systems, while at the same time mimicking their hierarchical militarised structure as well as having its own parliament, legal system, punishments and economy. They also have their own code of conduct that members are expected to memorise, along with the history of the gang, and language (called “Sabela”; Lindegard & Gear, 2014; Pinnock, 2016).

The Numbers gang has powerful smuggling networks, controlling access to food, cell phones, cigarettes and drugs in prison (Lindegard & Gear, 2014). Each of the gangs has a specific function: the 26s focus on robbery through deception and without the use of violence, the 27s uphold the gang law and maintain peace across the gangs, and the 28s fight on behalf of all three gangs for improved conditions in prison and can engage in sodomy as a means of gaining and establishing power (Pinnock, 2016). The three key roles in the prison system are the gangster, who is involved in one of the Number gangs; the “wyfie” (which in

Afrikaans refers to the female partner of a mating pair of animals; the use of an animal term is derogatory) - a male inmate who usually has a feminine identity imposed on him and is in a sexual relationship (most often coerced) with another inmate who is usually a gangster; and the “franse” (non-gangsters), who may or may not wish to become gang members, and who are considered inferior to the gangsters (Lindegard & Gear, 2014).

The gangsters and wyfies are defined according to a heteronormative view of masculinity and femininity. The gangsters occupy hierarchical ranks within each of the Number gangs that are considered masculine and concerned with the “business” of the gangs (Lindegard & Gear, 2014). These ranks include, for example, a Makwezi (president), generals, captains, lawyers, doctors, teachers, inspectors and soldiers (Pinnock, 2016). The wyfies occupy feminised ranks, and are typically considered supportive of and inferior to the masculine ranks, and are expected to be sexually available to their masculine counterparts (Lindegard & Gear, 2014). While some individuals may remain franse for the duration of their imprisonment by, for example, gaining respect from gang members for being violent or through practising religion and thus isolating themselves from the gangsters, the position of the franse is for the most part tenuous in that they generally have limited autonomy in the prison and are vulnerable to attack from gangsters (Lindegard & Gear, 2014). Becoming a gangster offers protection, access to basic commodities (such as blankets and clothing) and a sense of belonging (Peacock & Theron, 2007), but it also makes one vulnerable to assaults from other gangsters or prison staff and increases the likelihood of committing violence in order to adhere to the gang rules. Moving up the ranks of the gang can help a gangster to gain more influence and protection, but also makes it much more difficult to get out of the gang (Lindegard & Gear, 2014).

The prison and street gangs were considered completely separate until the late 1980s. Up until that point becoming a Numbers gang member was a lengthy and rigorous process which almost always required committing violent acts and spending many years in prison in order to rise up the ranks. However, in the 1990s the Numbers gang took the decision to no longer enforce the requirement of having to stab someone in prison in order to become a member, opening up the opportunity for street gang members outside of prison to take on the Number gang culture. Street gangsters started to arrive in prison (having never previously been imprisoned), claiming to be Number gang members and correctly using Sabela (Pinnock, 2016). By the early 1990s the Number started to be a prominent feature in the street gangs, eventually exerting a strong hold over organised crime. By the late 1990s two of the major street gangs – the Americans and the Firm – were using the rituals of the Number, with

the Americans aligning themselves with the 26s and the Firm with the 28s (Pinnock, 2016; Standing, 2006; Steinberg, 2004).

As is evidenced by the above discussion, both street and prison gangs in South Africa are particularly powerful and structured criminal organisations, with the Numbers gang exerting considerable control in the prison system and the street gangs running an enterprising illegal economy under the leadership of the criminal elite. In the section that follows I explore how gangsterism has been dealt with in South Africa, focusing on the actions of state and non-state actors.

#### **1.2.4 Responses to gangsterism**

The state has largely responded to gangsterism in South Africa by trying to suppress criminal activities through tough legislation. Membership of street gangs has been criminalised through section 4 of the Prevention of Organised Crime Act (POCA) and anyone found guilty of being a member of a criminal group can receive a maximum sentence of life imprisonment or one billion Rand fine (approximately 81.5 million US dollars; Standing, 2005; Van Wyk & Theron, 2005). Underpinned by POCA, the investigation and prosecution of gang leaders in the Cape Flats has been a key focus of the state since the early 2000s (Standing, 2006). Standing (2006) has criticised this punitive response to gangs. Citing the unsuccessful War on Drugs in the United States, he argues that removing key players may not necessarily lead to a reduction in organised crime and could even lead to an increased competition in illegal markets. As an example, while PAGAD (People Against Gangsterism and Drugs – a vigilante group formed in 1996) killed more than 24 gang leaders by the end of 2000, the gangs continued to exist, and there was evidence of an increase in fighting between gangs who were competing for new opportunities in the market (Kinnes, 2017; Standing, 2006). In addition, the criminalisation of gang membership is unlikely to deter people from forming gangs or joining existing ones and may in fact provoke gangs to become more cohesive in an act of rebellion or protest against authority (Standing, 2005, 2006). This was the case in El Salvador and Honduras, where the “mano duro” (heavy hand) policies to combat gangsterism were introduced in the early 2000s. Rather than weakening gangs, the policy had the effect of uniting gangsters against government with the outcome of increasingly violent reprisals (Cooper & Ward, 2012).

When it comes to policing gangs in the Cape Flats, elaborate police campaigns and operations have been launched. These have the benefit of increasing police presence and promoting a greater awareness of gangs in communities (Kinnes, 2017). However, they also

present with several problem areas, as outlined by Kinnes (2017) in his research on police and gang interactions. Firstly, when it comes to policing gangs, communication between different police units is poor. Secondly, there is no available evidence of proper evaluations of gang-related operations. And thirdly, many of the operations are comprised of corrupt police officers who, for instance, inform gangsters of upcoming raids and have even been involved in the sale of firearms (Kinnes, 2017). As Standing (2006) notes “Without stringent anti-corruption measures, increasing the powers of the police in a bid to win the war may be counter-productive and embed organised criminal activities” (p. 267). Further, gangs learn from the failures of these police operations and better prepare themselves for the next round of operations (Kinnes, 2017).

There are several gang and crime-related prevention programmes that exist in South Africa including Usiko, which aims to draw at-risk youth away from gangs and delinquency by offering alternative rituals to that of the gang initiation process (Van Wyk & Theron, 2005), as well as the Chrysalis Youth Academy, the Youth Leaders against Crime Programme, and the Bambanani Strategy which all focus on establishing youth clubs that offer an alternative to gang membership (Cooper & Ward, 2012; Ward & Bakhuis, 2010). Chrysalis appears to be the only programme to have been formally evaluated, and was recognised in 2006 as a best practice example of prevention of youth crime (Cooper & Ward, 2012).

Another gang intervention initiative is Ceasefire, a programme originally developed by Gary Slutkin in Chicago that uses a public health approach, viewing violence as a disease (Cure Violence, 2018). Ceasefire (now called Cure Violence in the United States) aims to reduce and prevent gang-related violence by interrupting the transmission of violence and mediating conflict situations, by changing the norms and behaviour of high risk youth (including gang members), and by changing community norms that accept or condone violence (Mahamed, 2014; Cure Violence, 2018). The Ceasefire programme is an example of a focused deterrence or “pulling levers” strategy (Braga, Weisburd, & Turchan, 2018, p. 206). Focused deterrence strategies are increasingly being used to reduce recurring criminal offending and serious violent crime committed by gangs (Braga et al., 2018). The aim of focused deterrence is to change the behaviour of the offender by understanding the dynamics and conditions that sustain criminal activities, and by implementing an appropriately focused strategy that draws together law enforcement, community mobilization and social service actions (Braga, 2008; Braga et al., 2018; Kennedy, 2008). A variety of sanctions, or “pulling levers”, are used to stop offenders from continuing with their violent behaviour. In addition,

community representatives clearly articulate the unacceptability of violent behaviour, and social service providers help provide an exit from gangsterism and crime via psychosocial support, education and employment, thereby incentivising prosocial behaviour (Braga, 2008; Densley & Jones, 2016).

Regrettably, there is a dearth of gang intervention programmes in South Africa that focus specifically on helping youth disengage from gangs. Programmes in South African prisons that focus on criminal offending and delinquency more generally are Reintegration and Diversion for Youth (READY – established by the President’s Award for Youth Empowerment), the Tough Enough programme (run by NICRO, a Cape Town non-profit organisation, NPO, specialising in social crime prevention and offender reintegration) and Khulisa’s Destinations programme (Cooper & Ward, 2012; Steyn, 2005). While these are not explicitly targeted at gang members, their work with young offenders is likely to include gang members (Cooper & Ward, 2012). Some of these programmes show promising results. For instance, both READY and Destinations show evidence of lower recidivism rates amongst participants (Steyn, 2005). However, to the best of my knowledge there are no existing evaluations of these programmes in relation to whether or not they support youth in desisting from gangsterism. Indeed Roman, Decker, and Pyrooz (2017) acknowledge that it is rare for gang interventions to focus directly on youth disengagement from gangs. Rather, the focus is usually on violence or crime reduction.

### **1.2.5 Summary**

Having given a broad overview of gangs in South Africa, including the sociopolitical context of apartheid and its legacy, the role coloured (masculine) identity plays in gang involvement, the nature of street and prison gangs in South Africa and finally, responses to gangsterism, I now turn to my review of gangsterism more generally, beginning with the nature of gangs as well as the impact of gangs on gang members and communities. Providing an overview of the nature and impact of gangs helps to contextualise and frame this study on gang desistance within the broader international literature on gangs. In addition, as will become clear in section 1.4, gangs can have a negative impact not only on gang members themselves, but also on their families and the wider community. It is thus important to consider the impact of gangs as it provides justification for studying gang desistance.

### 1.3 The nature of gangs

Early sociologists like Frederic Thrasher from the University of Chicago defined a gang as “an interstitial group originally formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict” with other groups (Kinnes, 2017; Pitts, 2008; Thrasher, 1927, p. 46). Thrasher further characterised the collective behaviour of gangs as contributing to the development of morale, traditions, solidarity, group awareness and connection to local territory (Kinnes, 2017; Thrasher, 1927). He also believed that gangs were temporary, in that over time they would dissolve as a result of assimilation into mainstream economy and social life (Pitts, 2008). Following on from Thrasher’s (1927) initial descriptions of gangs, Whyte (1943) - in describing the Italian slums in Cornerville, Boston in the 1930s – argued that amidst an apparently socially disorganised community, there was in fact social organisation, in that there was a hierarchy of gangs that governed different areas of the Cornerville community (Kinnes, 2017; Whyte, 1943). Cohen and Short (1958) extended this idea, purporting that delinquency was socially linked and that it provided a solution to the stressors faced by adolescent boys in working class communities (Kinnes, 2017). Building on the work of Whyte (1943), Cloward and Ohlin (1960) identified three subcultures which they believed impacted on the gang: the criminal subculture (illegal means of generating an income), the conflict subculture (using violence to achieve status) and the retreatist subculture (gangs resort to using drugs because they do not have opportunities for conflict or crime; Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Kinnes, 2017). However, gangs have since changed in that they are now largely integrated and these subcultural boundaries no longer exist (Kinnes, 2017).

Other gang researchers argue that gangs form as a result of society not being able to provide marginalised or excluded young people with “culturally legitimated rites of passage into the adult world” (Bloch & Niederhoffer, 1976; Pitts, 2008, p. 27). When this happens, the gang can provide youngsters with opportunities of empowerment and resistance to dominant norms within society (Brotherton & Barrios, 2004; Hagedorn, 2005; Kinnes, 2017). This resonates with Pinnock’s (1984) argument that gangs in South Africa formed and grew in the Cape Flats as a result of tumultuous and unstructured home environments, as well as a lack of a sense of community and social growth (Mthembu, 2015; Pinnock, 1984; Samara, 2011; Standing, 2006).

The above-described view on gangs has been termed “appreciative” (Pitts, 2008, p. 27) given that it empathizes with the gang member and looks at the meaning and social significance of gang-related behaviour. However, from the late 1960s onwards a more “correctional” perspective emerged which focused primarily on the criminality of the gang

(Pitts, 2008, p. 27). The criminal and violent activities of gangs, the social harm caused by gang members and the fear that gangs create in communities has been used to justify massive public expenditure on researching the gang phenomenon, as well as on the prosecution and punishment of gangs, and intervention programmes (Hallsworth & Young, 2004; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Pitts, 2008). Given this climate it is therefore unsurprising that definitions relating to the criminality of the gang emerged (Pitts, 2008). However, critics like Short (1997) argue that giving crime a central place in defining gangs paints a picture of gangs and their motivations as too narrow and simplistic (Pitts, 2008). Relatedly, English researchers Hallsworth and Young (2008) contend that constructing violence (in particular street violence) in multiply deprived areas as being a problem of gangs alone is a flawed exercise which “push[es] into the background the multitude of other factors that have a determinate effect on street violence such as poverty, diminishing welfare and the collapse of social systems” (Hallsworth & Young, 2008, pp. 190-191).

As is clear from the above, the ways in which gangs have been defined and understood over the years has changed. This highlights the importance of being “prepared to adapt definitions or, if necessary, invent new definitions in order to capture the reality of the groups we discover” (Pitts, 2008, p. 29).

In the following section I review the impact of gangs on gang members and the wider community.

#### **1.4 The impact of gangs**

Gangs can pose a serious threat to young people’s well-being. International evidence indicates that affiliation with and involvement in gangs is associated with drug dealing and substance use, school drop-out, unstable employment and economic hardship, delinquency, serious violent offending, weapon possession and use, prostitution, teen pregnancy, poor mental health outcomes and increased risk for violent victimisation and death (Ang, Huan, Chua, & Lim, 2012; Brown, Hippenssteele, & Lawrence, 2014; Decker, Melde, & Pyrooz, 2013; Katz, Webb, Fox, & Shaffer, 2011; Krohn, Ward, Thornberry, Lizotte, & Chu, 2011; Prinsloo, 2013; Pyrooz, Turanovic, Decker, & Wu, 2015; Standing, 2005; Ulloa, Dyson, & Wynes, 2012; Weerman, Lovegrove, & Thornberry, 2015). Further, gang members are victimised at rates that are far higher than their similarly situated peers, with the homicide rates of gangs estimated to be 100 times that of the general population in the United States (Decker & Pyrooz, 2010). While similar comparative statistics are not available in South Africa, the South African Police Services (SAPS) reported 18,673 murders from 2015-2016.

Gang violence accounted for 2.3 percent of this rate, and 13.4 percent of the murder rate in the province of the Western Cape (where many of the gangs are based) which was recorded at 3,444 between 2015 and 2016 (SAPS, 2016). However, evidence from developed international contexts suggests that it may not be gang membership alone that predicts violent victimisation; rather, criminal offending behaviours associated with gang membership may serve to increase the risk of victimisation (Katz et al., 2011).

Regardless, the lives of gang members are fraught with violence and “youth in gangs report disproportionate levels of exposure to violence when compared with community youth and non-gang members” (Kerig, Chaplo, Bennett, & Modrowski, 2016, p. 636). Further, gang members – internationally and in South Africa - are often expected to commit violent acts against others as part of initiation, turf wars and other gang-related activities (Kerig et al., 2016; Salo, 2007a; Steinberg, 2004). According to international evidence these violent experiences are related to negative mental health outcomes for gang members (Kerig et al., 2016). For example, experiences of violent victimisation, fear of future victimisation and violent ruminations account for the association between membership of a gang and anxiety disorders, as well as psychosis amongst gang members (Coid et al., 2013). Further, gang membership is linked to suicidality and this relationship is mediated by delinquency and exposure to violence (Madan, Mrug, & Windle, 2011). When it comes to violence perpetration, perpetration-induced trauma (suffering posttraumatic reactions following perpetration of violence) amongst youth gang members predicts emotional numbing and dissociation (Kerig et al., 2016). While studies on violence exposure and the mental health of gang members in South Africa is limited, a study conducted in a correctional facility found that individuals who were members of prison gangs scored significantly higher on subscales of anger, conduct problems, and substance abuse than those not involved in gangs (Prinsloo, 2013).

There is also international evidence that gang membership during adolescence impacts later life outcomes. Longer periods of gang involvement are associated with “precocious transitions” during late adolescence (Krohn et al., 2011, p. 997) including teenage parenthood, school drop-out, and leaving home early and cohabitation before marriage. All these factors are in turn predictors of economic difficulties and family problems in early adulthood, and are likely to result in continued crime involvement and/or arrest in adulthood (Krohn et al., 2011).

Gangs threaten the safety, security and health of not only the individuals involved, but also the community at large (Ulloa et al., 2012). The presence of gangs in communities

causes constant fear and tension (Standing, 2005; Ward, 2007). In the Cape Flats of South Africa, residents are often intimidated into helping gang members with their illegal activities by, for example, storing weapons and contraband for them (Standing, 2005). Further, gang violence is rife in the Cape Flats with community residents being exposed to gang violence on a regular basis (Mncube & Steinmann, 2014; Reckson & Becker, 2005). For instance, approximately half of children from 185 township schools in Cape Town reported witnessing others being hit, pushed or shoved by a gangster, and roughly four in ten children had seen others being attacked with a sharp weapon or shot at by a gang member (Shields, Nadasen, & Pierce, 2008). According to the news site News24 approximately 20 people were killed in Mitchells Plain (a suburb in the Cape Flats) in gang-related incidents in September 2017 alone (News24, 2017). Gang violence and violent crimes has escalated to such an extent that the South African police minister has called for the deployment of the South African National Defence Force to assist the police in stabilising and combating gang and other violence (News24, 2017).

Clearly, gangs pose a serious threat to both gang members and the wider community. However, there are also benefits to being a gang member. This, along with the risk factors for gang joining, will be the focus of the following section. While the focus in this study is on gang desistance, I include a section on gang joining here in light of the fact that the risk factors and motivations for becoming a gang member are likely to still exist if or when an individual decides to desist from the gang and could, therefore, influence the desistance process. While not all of the issues discussed in the following section are returned to in the findings of this thesis, I feel it important to highlight them in order to provide a thorough and in-depth review of the literature, and because they informed how I set my work up.

## **1.5 Gang joining**

Typically, youngsters start associating with gang members at the age of 11 or 12, and join a gang between 12 and 15 years of age (Densley, 2015; Howell, Braun, & Bellatty, 2017). This appears to be the case not only internationally but in South Africa too, with gang membership starting from age 12 and up (Legget, 2005).

### **1.5.1 Risk factors for gang joining**

A number of risk factors for joining a gang have been identified in the international literature (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Pyrooz, Sweeten, & Piquero, 2013), which overlap substantially with risk factors for aggressive behaviour and delinquency more generally

(Cooper & Ward, 2012). Involvement in a gang commences gradually over time and is generally the result of exposure to accumulating risk factors in the absence of protective or promotive factors (Howell et al., 2017; Howell & Egley, 2005). These risk factors are found in multiple interacting domains, including individual, family, peer, school and neighbourhood, and also exist across developmental stages in the life-course from preschool through to adolescence (Howell et al., 2017; Raby & Jones, 2016). I begin with a review of the individual-level risk factors.

According to international evidence several neurobiological factors are said to play a role in violent antisocial behaviour generally, including high levels of testosterone, temperamental difficulties, problems regulating attention and behaviour and an imbalance in levels of serotonin and dopamine (Pavlov, Chistiakov, & Chekhonin, 2012; Yildirim & Derksen, 2012). Importantly, these neurobiological vulnerabilities need to interact with factors in the individual's environment in order to result in violent behaviour (Pavlov et al., 2012; Ward, 2015). For example, male youth with a short variant of the functional polymorphism in the monoamine oxidase A (MAOA) gene (which plays a key role in metabolising dopamine, serotonin and noradrenaline) are at a higher risk of delinquent behaviour if exposed to child maltreatment (Åslund et al., 2011).

While there is research to show that boys are more likely than girls to join gangs (Merrin, Hong, & Espelage, 2015), there is growing recognition that females are becoming increasingly actively involved in gangs (De La Rue & Espelage, 2014). In South Africa, the limited research available suggests that girls and women in gangs can occupy the role of a fully-fledged gang members who actively participate in crime and violent acts (Shaw & Skywalker, 2017). They also may occupy a more supportive and submissive role, being the “glamorous girlfriends who enhance the status of their boyfriend” (Cooper & Ward, 2012, p. 247; Vetten, 2000). Indeed one of the main routes into gangs for girls and young women in South Africa is through developing a romantic relationship with a male gang member. Once part of the gang these women are often under constant surveillance of their male counterparts, and have limited independence of movement (Shaw & Skywalker, 2017).

Overall, the extant international evidence suggests that risk factors for gang joining are the same across genders (Sutton, 2017). For example, early antisocial behaviour, antisocial beliefs, associating with antisocial peers, low levels of social support and parental supervision and a lack of social bonds have been identified as risk factors for both men and women (O’Neal, Decker, Moule, & Pyrooz, 2016; Peterson & Panfil, 2014). However, there is evidence that young men may find instrumental factors (such as being able to escape

poverty) more meaningful in their decision to join gangs, while women may find affective and protective aspects of their involvement more relevant (Sutton, 2017). Further, female gang members are more likely to report peer and familial influences as reasons for becoming gang members, and less likely to cite action or fun as reasons (Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003). In addition, the experience of gang membership is likely to be different for female gang members. For instance, they have a lower risk of violent victimisation from other gangs (inter-gang violence) when compared to males, but are exposed to more intra-gang violence (for instance, sexual exploitation and assault; O'Neal et al., 2016). Indeed accounts of rape and sexual abuse are common amongst girls and women in South African gangs. Sex is also used as a currency in this context, with young women offering sexual favours to male gang members in exchange for the benefits the gang could offer, including protection and financial support (Shaw & Skywalker, 2017)

Other individual level factors identified in the international literature that are considered risks for gang involvement include low self-esteem, negative or traumatic life experiences, attention and learning problems, difficulties in perspective-taking, a lack of responsibility, negative attitudes towards the criminal justice system and mainstream social institutions, a positive attitude towards delinquency, prior involvement in delinquent behaviour and drug use (Cooper & Ward, 2012; Hautala, Sittner, & Whitbeck, 2016; Howell & Egley, 2005; Jackson, 2016; Katz & Fox, 2010; MacRae-Krisa, 2011; McDaniel, 2012; O'Brien, Daffern, Chu, & Thomas, 2013; Raby & Jones, 2016). In South Africa, youngsters who become addicted to drugs may start selling drugs for gangs (who manage the drug trade) so as to support their addiction (Cooper & Ward, 2012; Ward & Bakhuis, 2010). However, international longitudinal research has failed to find a correlation between drug use and gang membership. Rather, gangs seem to facilitate increased drug use *post* gang membership, likely through the influence of peers (Raby & Jones, 2016). The role of psychological factors in gang involvement such as depression, anxiety, poor impulse control and a lack of empathy, is equivocal – some international studies have found that they do increase the likelihood of gang membership, while others have found that they do not (O'Brien et al., 2013).

Association with delinquent peers has also been identified as a predictor of gang membership in international literature (Katz & Fox, 2010; Lenzi et al., 2015; McDaniel, 2012; O'Brien et al., 2013; Raby & Jones, 2016) as has living in a single parent household or foster care, family dysfunction (characterised by hostility and conflict), low parental education, poor parental attachment and monitoring and supervision, authoritarian (high parental demandingness and low responsiveness) and permissive parenting styles, having a

crime- or gang-involved family member, family financial stress and parents' pro-violent attitudes (Cooper & Ward, 2012; Garduno & Brancale, 2017; Hautala et al., 2016; Howell et al., 2017; Howell & Egley, 2005; MacRae-Krisa, 2011; McDaniel, 2012; Merrin et al., 2015; Raby & Jones, 2016; Vuk, 2017). The relationship between authoritarian parenting and gang membership has been found to be mediated by associating with delinquent peers, suggesting that the "high control and emotional coldness that characterizes authoritative parenting push children to associate with delinquent peers and then lead to gang involvement" (Vuk, 2017, p. 418). Cross-sectional studies also suggest a relationship between gang membership and challenging family dynamics and abuse, including sexual, physical and emotional abuse as well as neglect. However, due to the design of these studies the directionality of these risk relationships cannot be determined (Raby & Jones, 2016).

While living in an urban area is predictive of gang membership according to international evidence (Raby & Jones, 2016), youth in rural and suburban areas are just as likely to report joining a gang as urban youth (Watkins & Taylor, 2016). Low levels of education, school failure, low academic performance, access to drugs and firearms, high levels of poverty and unemployment and community arrest rates, living in an antisocial neighbourhood, low levels of attachment to and feeling unsafe in one's neighbourhood all enhance the likelihood of gang membership (Cooper & Ward, 2012; Gilman, Hill, Hawkins, Howell, & Kosterman, 2014; Howell & Egley, 2005; MacRae-Krisa, 2011; Raby & Jones, 2016). Low levels of school commitment and the presence of neighbourhood gang activity have also been identified as risk factors, but these findings are inconsistent (O'Brien et al., 2013). However, youth who become gang members, as opposed to taking another antisocial path, may do so because of ease of access to gangs in their neighbourhoods – they may reside in areas where gangs operate, and where they have friends or family who actively recruit them (Cooper & Ward, 2012).

Unfortunately, there is a dearth of research that empirically examines risk factors for gang joining in South Africa. However, there is some research on risk factors for delinquent and antisocial behaviour more generally. As noted above in the discussion on the international literature, these risk factors tend to overlap substantially with risk factors for gang involvement. A study that looked at the prevalence of criminogenic risk factors amongst high school learners in the Gauteng province of South Africa found a high endorsement of antisocial attitudes with violent attitudes at 51 percent, entitlement at 61 percent, antisocial intent at 56 percent and positive attitudes towards antisocial associates at 45 percent. Further, medium to strong correlations were found between antisocial intent and antisocial associates,

and between antisocial intent and entitlement, and violence (Prinsloo, 2016). A longitudinal study that tested the predictors of antisocial behaviour (including conduct problems, gang membership, substance use and sexual risk behaviour) amongst youth from poor, urban areas in South Africa, found that being male and experiencing community violence predicted antisocial behaviour (Gardner, Waller, Maughan, Cluver, & Boyes, 2015). In another study that looked at offenders in South African correctional facilities, violent offenders who had an early age of onset of offending (and who therefore were likely to be life-course persistent offenders) were differentiated from other offenders by male gender, violence at home and school, familial criminal involvement, poor performance and lack of motivation at school, crime victimisation, alcohol abuse and gang membership (Souverein, Ward, Visser, & Burton, 2015). Thus, the limited research on risk factors for antisocial behaviour in South Africa demonstrates that these factors fall within the individual, family, school and community domain which is in line with the international evidence on risk factors for gang involvement.

### **1.5.2 Motives for joining a gang**

Along with the risk factors for gang joining, there are also a number of factors that may motivate youth to become gang members, including the financial and material gains a gang can offer (Chalas & Grekul, 2017; Howell et al., 2017; Howell & Egley, 2005). South African youngsters living in areas affected by gangsterism as well as former gang members themselves, report that one of the attractions of gangs is the ease of access to financial and material resources, particularly in a context of poverty where fundamental human needs are often not adequately met, or met at all (Daniels & Adams, 2010; Owen & Greeff, 2015; van der Merwe & Swanepoel, 2017; Van Wyk, 2001; Ward & Bakhuis, 2010). Another motivating factor, according to both international and South African literature, is the safety and protection a gang can offer youth (Anderson, 2009; Bility, 1999; Burnett, 1999; Howell et al., 2017; Wijnberg & Green, 2014). A desire for protection may be particularly pertinent for youngsters who experience ongoing neighbourhood violence and personal and familial trauma (Quinn, Pacella, Dickson-Gomez, & Nydegger, 2017). South African former gang members in Daniels and Adams (2010) study had a host of adverse experiences as children and adolescents, including being exposed to promiscuity, drunkenness, abuse and homelessness. The authors note: “Given such family backgrounds they had to find ways to survive, and gangsterism provided the way” (Daniels & Adams, 2010, p. 54).

At the same time, however, youth may also be drawn into gangsterism because of the action, excitement and “rush” that street crime and gang activity offers (Bergen-Cico, Haygood-El, Jennings-Bey, & Lane, 2014). South African adolescents in Owen and Greeff's (2015) study on the factors attracting and discouraging adolescents from becoming involved in a gang reported that a draw of gangsterism was the physically enjoyable experience of activities that were adrenalin loaded and involved risk-taking. However, being in a gang also increases one's risk for violent victimisation and homicide, as discussed in the previous section on the impact of gangs (Raby & Jones, 2016).

Youth may also be motivated to join a gang in order to be around friends and family members who are already part of a gang, or in order to make new friends, or garner a sense of belonging, recognition and acceptance (Chu et al., 2015; Howell & Egley, 2005; O'Brien et al., 2013; Taylor, Deuchar, & van der Leun, 2015). South African literature shows that youngsters may be drawn to gangs when they are faced with difficult home environments where they do not feel loved or cared for. In this context the gang can become a substitute family, providing support, belonging and acceptance (Anderson, 2009; Burnett, 1999; Daniels & Adams, 2010; van der Merwe & Swanepoel, 2017; Van Wyk, 2001; Wijnberg & Green, 2014).

Furthermore, gangs in South Africa may offer young people an opportunity for self-respect and status which they may not be afforded in their own families and communities (Kinnes, 2012). In Adam Cooper's South African study on masculinities of 25 coloured adolescent boys awaiting trial (Cooper, 2009; Cooper & Foster, 2008), one of the ways in which participants portrayed gangsterism was as a means by which reputation and status could be gained through participating in violent and criminal activities (such as shooting guns). As the authors note: “Through these types of narratives, protagonists, marginalized working class coloured boys, are temporarily transformed into superheroes” (Cooper & Foster, 2008, p. 13). In this way, gang members are revered for their fighting skills and criminal daring (Glaser, 2000; Walsh & Mitchell, 2006). Thus, for young, marginalised men who are unable to assert their masculine identity through material and symbolic capital (for instance, through permanent employment), being a gang member may offer an alternative means to asserting their gendered identities (Mthembu, 2015; Salo, 2007a). This is of particular importance in South Africa, where youth unemployment is rife: in the first quarter of 2017 the youth (ages 15-34) unemployment rate was reported to be 38.6 percent (while the unemployment rate across the population was 27.7 percent; Statistics South Africa, 2017a).

Further, being a gang member has a negative impact on an individual's ability to find employment and gain financial security after desisting (Raby & Jones, 2016).

### **1.5.3 Protective factors**

Research on factors that protect against gang joining is limited and still in its infancy (Howell & Egley, 2005; O'Brien et al., 2013). Protective factors have a dual function in that they can shield individuals from risk and also reduce the negative impact of risk factors (Howell et al., 2017). For instance, high levels of empathy both reduce the likelihood of gang involvement, and also mitigate the relationship between peer deviance and gang membership (Lenzi et al., 2015). Other factors that may protect youngsters from joining gangs – according to international literature - include good coping strategies, parental involvement and monitoring, authoritative parenting style (characterised by high demandingness and high responsiveness), family cohesiveness and support, association with prosocial peers, good social skills, school commitment, a sense of belonging in school, connections with religious institutions, adult support in the neighbourhood, perceived neighbourhood safety and belief in moral order (Katz & Fox, 2010; Lenzi et al., 2015; Li et al., 2002; McDaniel, 2012; Merrin et al., 2015; O'Brien et al., 2013; Vuk, 2017).

South African young people discuss similar factors that they feel discourage gang membership, including having ambitions for their education and careers, making responsible and moral decisions in their lives, wanting to treat others with fairness and respect, a wish to be on good terms with their families, valuing positive relationships with loved ones and caring about their own and their loved ones' safety (Owen and Greeff, 2015; Ward & Bakhuis, 2009).

### **1.6 Chapter summary**

This chapter has shown that gangs in South Africa need to be understood in the socio-political context of apartheid and its legacy. It has also shown that many of the street and prison gangs in South Africa today are powerful and structured organisations which, like other gangs internationally, can have a negative impact not only on gang members but also the community at large. International literature, supported by some South African studies, shows us that gang joining (including risk and protective factors, and motivations for becoming a gang member) is a fairly well understood phenomenon. Given that if or when an individual decides to *desist* from gang involvement these factors will still exist, it is important to understand how the desisting individual overcomes these risk factors, resists the pulls

towards gangsterism and also draws on any protective factors that may support their desistance. Unfortunately, however, desistance from gang involvement is less well-understood than gang joining (Berger, Abu-Raiya, Heineberg, & Zimbardo, 2016; Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, 2014; Pyrooz et al., 2013; Roman et al., 2017). In the following chapter I review the literature on desistance from gang involvement. Because it is a relatively new field of inquiry, the broader crime desistance literature is drawn on where applicable. Thereafter I review the literature on resilience in the context of gang involvement and criminality, and end the chapter with a section on gang desistance studies in South Africa.

## CHAPTER TWO: DESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE

Gang desistance may be less well-understood than gang joining partly as a result of the myth, driven largely by popular media and early gang research that being a gang member is a lifelong commitment and leaving the gang is impossible (Carson & Vecchio, 2015). However, ethnographic and longitudinal research has identified the presence of former gang members, and there is increasing recognition that, for the most part, gang membership is temporary, with the majority of youth being involved in a gang for less than one year (48-69 percent) and seldom for over two years (17-48 percent; Carson & Vecchio, 2015).

One of the first gang-related studies that explored desistance was conducted in the late 1970s and early 1980s by James Diego Vigil in Southern California, who interviewed and administered surveys to Chicano gang members, their peers and relatives, and members of the criminal justice and public services systems (Vigil, 1988). In discussing leaving the gang Vigil (1988) noted that the process was generally a gradual one that consisted of a series of steps and was frequently accompanied by being “beaten out” - being physically beaten by one’s fellow gang members in order to prove one’s worth. Vigil (1988) also found that those who had exited the gang had usually formed increased ties to social institutions, including prison, employment and family. Since Vigil’s (1988) seminal work on gangs there has been an increase in the study of gang desistance – particularly in the last decade.

Given the problems associated with gangsterism, and the impact gang involvement has on not only gang members but the community at large, understanding how and why individuals desist from gangs is vitally important as it has implications for the development of effective interventions for youth involved in gangs (Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Chu et al., 2015; MacRae-Krisa, 2011; Pyrooz et al., 2014; Pyrooz, McGloin, & Decker, 2017).

In the sections that I follow I begin by providing an outline for the strategy used in collecting papers on desistance from gang involvement, following which I review the literature on gang (and crime) desistance, exploring desistance-related theories and empirical research. I then discuss resilience and how it has been applied to gang and crime-related research, and end the chapter with a section on gang desistance studies in South Africa.

### **2.1 Search strategy**

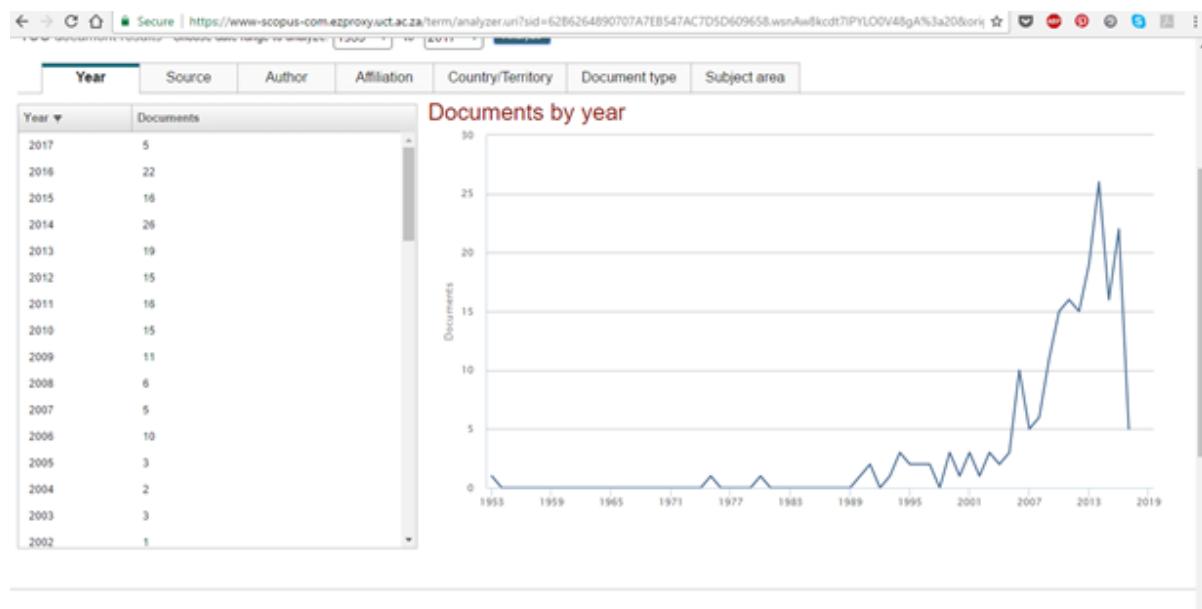
In collecting papers on desistance from gang involvement, I used a systematic search strategy in order to ensure a thorough review of the literature.

I conducted this search between the months of March 2017 and December 2017. Using the Boolean method, I searched for the keywords (desist\* OR disengage\* OR leav\*

OR exit) AND (gang OR gangs OR gangster\*) AND (NOT AU gang<sup>6</sup>) on the following databases, hosted on the EBSCOHost platform: MEDLINE, Academic Search Premier, Africa-Wide Information, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EconLit, ERIC, Humanities International Complete, MasterFILE Premier, PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO and SocINDEX with Full Text. In searching for papers I consulted with the university librarian who informed me that the major criminology and criminal justice journals are hosted on PsycINFO and SocINDEX. In order to ensure that the databases were generating articles relevant to desistance, I also conducted an additional search on HeinOnline (recommended by the university librarian). This search generated many of the same articles in my original searches on the EBSCOHost platform and did not generate any different articles relevant to my thesis.

Given that gang desistance is a fairly new field of enquiry, I chose not to limit my search to only peer-reviewed articles, but did limit my focus to English-language dissertations, books and papers published in academic journals between the years 2000 and 2017. The decision to focus on this time period was based on a search conducted on Scopus which showed that the bulk of gang desistance research falls within this timeframe – in particular from the mid 2000's onwards (see screenshot of Scopus search below).

### 2.1.1 Results of Scopus search



<sup>6</sup> When this limitation was not included, over two hundred irrelevant results were generated with “gang” in the authors’ first or surname.

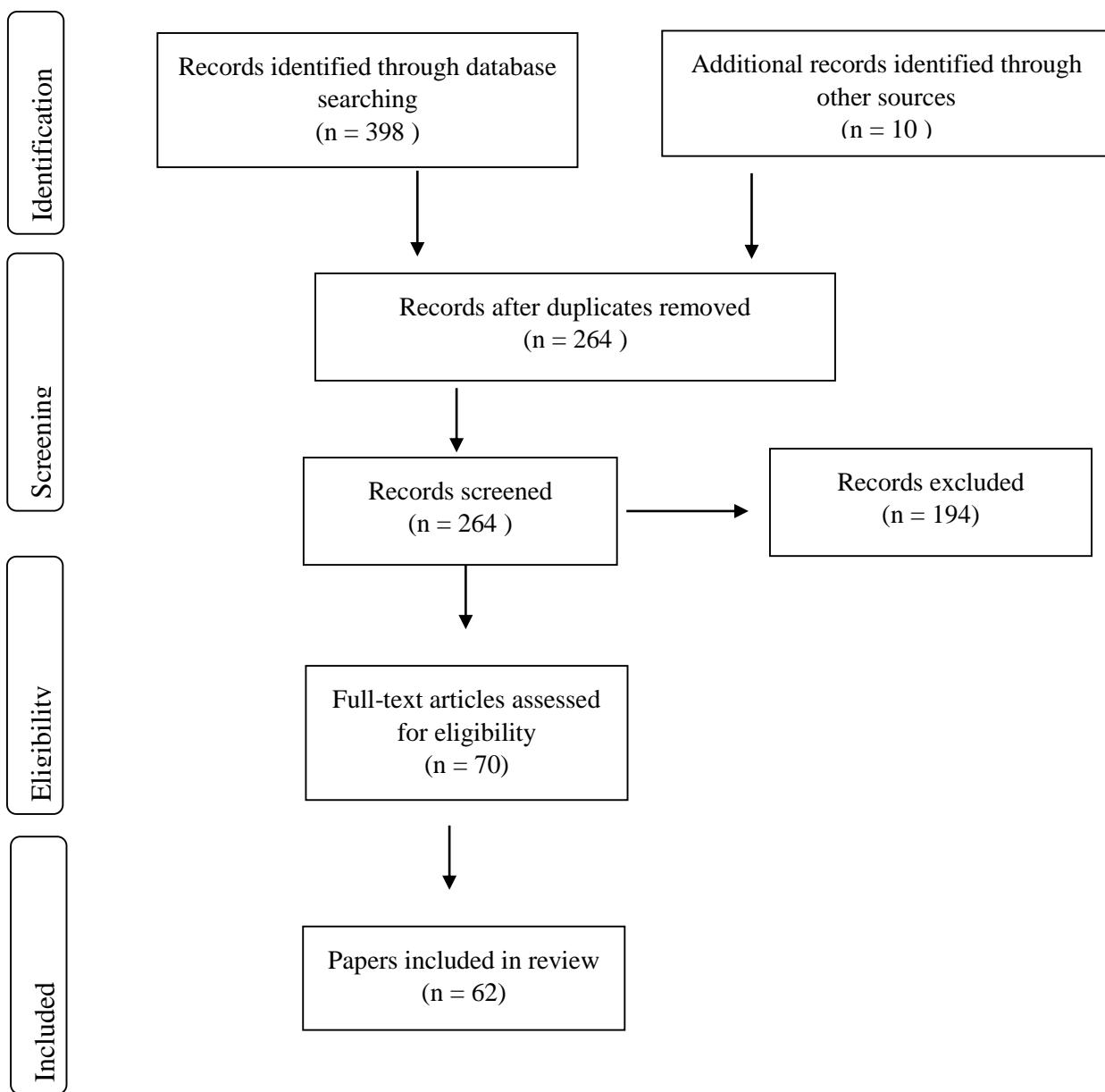
The above keyword search generated 398 results. An additional ten papers were identified through other sources (i.e. hand searches of reference lists of review articles and articles shared via the Eurogang network, a group of experts in the field of gang research). Once all duplicates were removed, the titles and abstracts of 262 papers were screened which resulted in 70 papers being selected for possible inclusion. The full-text of these papers was assessed and 62 were selected for final inclusion in the review. In screening the papers the following inclusion/exclusion criteria were applied:

1. Papers in which primary research was conducted or reviews were undertaken.
2. Papers where the predominant focus was on desistance from gang involvement.

Exclusion criteria:

1. Papers which focused exclusively on desistance from crime.
2. Papers which focused on desistance from terrorist organisations.

### **2.1.2 PRISMA flowchart**



## 2.2 Desistance

As with the sections in the previous chapter on the impact of gangs and gang joining, South African literature on gang desistance is limited. Much of what we know about gang desistance comes from high-income contexts including the United States (Albert, 2008; Berger et al., 2016; Bolden, 2012, 2013; Bubolz, 2014; Carson, Peterson, & Esbensen, 2013; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011; Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule, 2014; Flores, 2009, 2016; Mandel, 2006; Moloney, MacKenzie, Hunt, & Joe-Laidler, 2009; Muñoz, 2014; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Pyrooz et al., 2014; Rice, 2015; Weerman et al., 2015), Canada (Bailey, 2015; Chalas & Grekul, 2017; Deane, Bracken, & Morrisette, 2007; Descormiers, 2013; Goodwill & Ishiyama, 2016), Denmark (Deuchar et al., 2016; Kolind, Søgaard, Hunt, & Thylstrup, 2017; Søgaard, Kolind, Thylstrup, & Deuchar, 2016), the United Kingdom (Gormally, 2014; McLean, Maitra, & Holligan, 2017), Singapore (Chu et al., 2015) and the Netherlands (van Gemert, Roks, & Drogt, 2016), with only a few studies conducted in low- or middle-income contexts such as Central America (Brenneman, 2014), Brazil (Carvalho & Soares, 2016), and South Africa (Daniels & Adams, 2010; Rodgers & Jensen, 2015; Wijnberg & Green, 2014). Therefore, much of the review below is based on international evidence, drawing on South African research wherever possible.

As discussed in section 2.1, the gang desistance literature included in these sections is based on a systematic search strategy. However, given that gang desistance is a relatively new field of enquiry, I also draw on criminal desistance literature where applicable. I acknowledge, though, that it could be argued that desisting from crime is not functionally the same thing as desisting from gangs, as gang membership is a state while crime is an act (Densley & Pyrooz, 2017; Gormally, 2014). The key difference between the two is that desistance from crime concerns the stopping of a pattern of criminal behaviour or lifestyle, while desistance from gangs concerns ceasing criminal activities *and* leaving a criminal peer group. Arguably, this may be more difficult than desisting from crime given the companionship gang membership offers (Mandel, 2006; O'Brien et al., 2013), that emotional and social ties to the gang may persist even after criminal offending has stopped and that desisting gang members may experience pressure from their gang peers to remain a member of the gang (Carson & Vecchio, 2015). Despite this difference, the crime desistance literature can facilitate a better understanding of gang desistance. In particular, the criminal desistance theories of informal social control, cognitive transformation and identity reformulation (all of which will be discussed in section 2.2.2) may have much to offer in conceptualising and researching desistance from gangs (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011).

In the sections that follow, I explore how desistance has been defined and operationalized, the theories that have been used in understanding desistance, and finally empirical research on desistance.

### **2.2.1 Defining and operationalizing desistance**

I explore the ways in which desistance has been defined and operationalized in order to provide evidence for how I chose to define and operationalize desistance in this thesis (see Chapter Four, section 4.3).

There are difficulties associated with defining and operationalizing gang desistance given the complexity in determining at what stage an individual has truly stopped their criminal behaviour, and also given the fact that while an individual may stop offending, he/she may retain ties with members of his/her former gang, and thus feel peer pressure to re-join the gang (Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Decker et al., 2014; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Persisting ties post de-identification with the gang has been identified as a qualitatively important aspect of the desistance process (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Pyrooz et al., 2014). In one of the first seminal empirical studies on gang desistance, Decker and Lauritsen (2002) found that although the 24 ex-gang members in their St Louis study (who were individually interviewed) reported being former gang members, a considerable number claimed that they continued participating in criminal and non-criminal activities with members of their gang, and retained emotional ties with them. Relatedly, former gang members may struggle against the temptation to reoffend as a result of peer pressure from their former gang, and/or because of the difficulties in finding a legitimate source of income given the stigma attached to gangsterism and the criminal record they are likely to hold (Cooper & Ward, 2012; Deuchar et al., 2016; Søgaard et al., 2016). Decker and Lauritsen (2002) proposed a typology of former gang membership status, consisting of four categories:

- Category A: participants had no emotional ties to the gang nor did they engage in activities with the gang
- Category B: participants had emotional ties with the gang, but did not engage in activities
- Category C: participants had no emotional ties but engaged in activities
- Category D: participants had emotional ties with the gang and engaged in activities with them.

Decker and Lauritsen (2002) concluded that when it comes to desistance, “the process of disengagement is often gradual” (p. 66). In more recent research, Pyrooz and Decker (2011; leading scholars in the field of gang desistance) noted that many of the 84 former gang members in their study (drawn from local juvenile facilities in Arizona) maintained ties to their former gang: on average, at least two social and/or emotional ties were reported by participants, despite the fact that they had been separated from their gang for almost two years. Further, a number of former gang members noted that if their gang were to be disrespected or attacked by a rival gang, they would retaliate. In later work, David Pyrooz and colleagues also established that former gang members with more ties to their gangs suffered increased levels of victimisation, and that “ties were increased by the presence of gangs in the neighbourhood and decreased by the length of time since desisting from the gang” (Pyrooz et al., 2014, p. 508).

Thus, there is a growing argument for understanding gang desistance not as a single event, but rather as “a more gradual process, where an individual has left their gang, but retains a diminishing number and diminished intensity of ties to members of the former gang” (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011, p. 423), with their involvement in crime waning over time (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). This definition is in line with the broader criminological literature that also tends to approach desistance as a process and argues that criminal behaviour can be sporadic, with termination of offending often taking place repeatedly and intermittently (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Decker et al., 2014; Maruna, 2001; Pyrooz et al., 2014). Some criminologists argue for defining desistance as the process of maintaining a crime-free lifestyle in spite of the obstacles and challenges that life presents (Maruna, 2001).

A distinction has also been made in the criminal desistance literature between primary and secondary desistance, where primary desistance refers to breaks or lulls in committing criminal offences, while secondary desistance refers to the longer term maintenance of non-offending coupled with a change in identity from “offender” to “non-offender” (King, 2013a; Maruna, 2001). However, authors like Bottoms, Shapland, Costello, Holmes, and Muir (2004) argue against the inclusion of this change in identity as they feel it implies that an individual who has stopped offending for a significant period of time but who has not experienced a strong identity change would not be considered a “true” desister. Indeed some former gang members in Bubolz’s (2014) study felt that they did not need to experience a change in their sense of self in order to be considered former gang members; rather, modification of one’s behaviour was considered more important. There has also been argument for the inclusion of tertiary desistance, which encompasses social and legal

recognition of a person's desistance - in other words, recognition from the community, the state and the legal system (Gormally, 2014; McNeill, 2014). Nugent and Schinkel (2016) argue for using the terms "act-desistance" (referring to non-offending), "identity desistance" (the internalisation of a non-offending identity) and "relational desistance" (other people recognising a change in behaviour), noting that this terminology offers a better description and differentiation between the different aspects of desistance than "primary", "secondary" and "tertiary" which imply a sequencing in time or importance (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016, p. 570).

Despite the arguments for understanding desistance as a gradual process, there is recognition that desistance can also be more abrupt (Chalas & Grekul, 2017; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002). This kind of abrupt desistance has been called "knifing off" (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011, p. 419), which refers to the immediate severing of all ties to the gang – usually by moving neighbourhood or cities - and thus eliminating or reducing opportunities to offend (Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). In contrast, the more gradual desistance process is usually characterised by developing beliefs and commitments that are not in line with those held by the gang. These new beliefs and commitments may arise as a result of an accumulation of life events (for example, personal victimisation by the gang, entering into a committed intimate relationship) that contribute to an individual deciding to de-identify with the gang, and gradually see his/her fellow gang members less, and become more involved in prosocial activities (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Vigil, 1988).

Gang embeddedness may influence whether the process of desistance is abrupt or gradual, and also plays a role in desistance more generally (Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Pyrooz et al., 2014). Gang embeddedness refers to how immersed an individual is in his/her gang, including involvement and identification with and status among the gang members (Pyrooz et al., 2013). Core gang members (those who are highly embedded in the gang (Berger et al., 2016) may experience more difficulty in leaving the gang than peripheral members (those whose relationship with the gang is more intermittent (Carson & Vecchio, 2015), as a result of group dependence (Decker et al., 2014). Pyrooz et al. (2013; drawing on data from the Pathways to Desistance study, a longitudinal study conducted with 1354 adjudicated youth in Arizona and Pennsylvania) found that individuals who were weakly embedded in their gangs desisted at a quicker rate compared to those who were more deeply embedded. They argued that as an individual becomes more embedded in a gang, connections to other prosocial networks become more constrained, thus resulting in access to fewer resources from these networks (Pyrooz et al., 2014; Pyrooz et al., 2013). Importantly, though, even individuals

who are highly embedded in their gangs can still desist (Berger et al., 2016; Decker et al., 2014).

Gang embeddedness also has consequences for criminal offending: a higher level of embeddedness corresponds with more offending, while a reduction in embeddedness corresponds with less offending (Decker et al., 2014; Sweeten, Pyrooz, & Piquero, 2013). Thus, gang embeddedness is an important component of desistance, influencing both the rate at which someone desists (if at all) as well as their engagement in crime.

I will now turn to the theoretical frameworks that have been applied to desistance, focusing on both desistance from gangs and crime. The gang-related theories discussed come from the systematic search strategy I used for my review on gang desistance literature, while the crime-related theories I draw on are the more dominant and most cited theories in the literature.

### **2.2.2 Desistance theories**

Up until fairly recently, much of the theory related to desistance has been divided into two schools of thought. The one focuses on informal social control, and the other on subjective shifts within the individual (identity-related theories). However, there is increasing recognition that desistance involves an interaction between both social and subjective factors (Ellis & Bowen, 2017). Below, I discuss these schools of thought, focusing on the life-course perspective (in particular, the age-graded theory of informal social control), identity-related theories and interactive theories. I explore these theories so as to contextualise my own gang desistance theory that I put forward in Chapter Seven.

#### **2.2.2.1 Life-course perspective on gang desistance**

As is the case with desistance from crime, gang desistance is often examined in light of the life course perspective: youth join gangs (onset), participate in gang activities for a period of time (continuity), and – for the most part – exit gangs (desistance; Pyrooz et al., 2013; Pyrooz et al., 2014; Roman et al., 2017). A core feature of the life-course perspective is the age-crime curve, which demonstrates that criminal offending tends to peak during the late teens and declines fairly rapidly thereafter (Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011).

Trajectories and turning points are key to the life course perspective (Pyrooz et al., 2013). A trajectory is a pathway, or an enduring life state – such as gang membership - that is susceptible to change (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Pyrooz et al., 2013; Roman et al., 2017),

while a turning point refers to an important life event or experience (for instance, employment or a new romantic relationship) that can modify the course a person's life takes (Carlsson, 2012; Laub, Sampson, & Sweeten, 2006; Pyrooz et al., 2013; Thornberry et al., 2003). In other words, the occurrence of a turning point in the life course can open up an opportunity for an individual to stop offending (Carlsson, 2012).

A particular life course perspective that, up until fairly recently, has dominated desistance-related research is the age-graded theory of informal social control as applied by Sampson and Laub (1993) to desistance from crime. According to this theory, criminal offenders will desist from crime when they are able to establish conventional social bonds with prosocial institutions of informal social control, including emotionally satisfying marriage, stable employment and military service (Bachman, Kerrison, Paternoster, O'Connell, & Smith, 2016; Bottoms et al., 2004; Farrall, Bottoms, & Shapland, 2010; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Paternoster, Bachman, Kerrison, O'Connell, & Smith, 2016; Sampson & Laub, 1993). Indeed the role of marriage and employment in facilitating desistance is well-documented (Moloney et al., 2009). These events are seen as "structurally induced turning points that serve as the catalyst for sustaining long-term behavioural change" (Laub & Sampson, 2003, p. 149).

Historically, the literature on turning points has focused on *prosocial* external events – such as marriage or the birth of a child - that can alter the criminal trajectory. However, recent work has broadened the concept to include *adverse* life events and experiences – including, for example, incarceration and violent victimisation - that may have more relevance for gang members (Roman et al., 2017; Sampson & Laub, 2016). There is also increasing recognition that the act of leaving the gang can be viewed as a transitional life event that can redirect the life course and reduce the likelihood of engaging in criminal activities (Melde & Esbensen, 2011; Pyrooz & Decker, 2014; Roman et al., 2017).

Indeed Sweeten et al. (2013; using data from the Pathways to Desistance study) explored whether leaving the gang can be associated with desisting from crime. They found that gang disengagement was indirectly related to a decline in offending through less exposure to antisocial peers, less unstructured routine activities, fewer experiences of victimisation and more temperance (impulse control and suppression of aggression). Similarly, gang desistance in Weerman et al.'s (2015) study (which relied on data from the Rochester Youth Development Study in the United States, and the NSCR School Study in the Netherlands) was related to a decrease in problem behaviour (including criminal offending

and substance use), a strengthening of conventional bonds and a decrease in exposure to peer influences.

Drawing on Sampson and Laub's (2005) turning point framework in their study on gang membership and using longitudinal data from a school-based law-related education programme in four cities across the United States, Melde and Esbensen (2011) found that gang desistance was associated with a reduction in delinquency, negative peer commitment, unstructured socialising and delinquent peer associations. Given their small sample size, though, they could not draw strong conclusions regarding the use of Sampson and Laub's (2005) turning point framework in understanding desistance from gang involvement. However, in a later study (that used a larger sample and again longitudinal data) they established that their analyses were "supportive of a turning point framework for understanding transitions into and out-of-gang membership" (Melde & Esbensen, 2014, p. 370). Their findings showed that leaving the gang was associated with a decrease in delinquency. However, it was not of the same magnitude as the increase in offending found in relation to joining the gang, indicating that desistance may be best understood as a prolonged process (Melde & Esbensen, 2014).

In an extension of the age-graded theory of informal social control, Laub and Sampson (2003) acknowledge the role that human agency and choice, routine activities, situational influences, and historical and cultural context play in contributing to desistance (Bachman et al., 2016; Laub & Sampson, 2003), noting that their original 1993 theory was lacking in a sufficient account of the role of agency in desistance (Hunter & Farrall, 2017). Despite these advances, a critique of the theory is that it portrays individuals as passive in the process of desistance, in that they change their behaviour because of events such as marriage or employment. Any cognitive change that individuals experience thus occurs as a result of participating in these traditional social roles (Bachman et al., 2016; Hallett & McCoy, 2015). This ignores the phenomenology of desistance: different individuals who are exposed to the same environment interpret, experience and make meaning of their environment differently (Flores, 2016; Maruna, 2001). This has led to some criminologists arguing that desistance involves not only changes in an offenders' life circumstances, but also subjective processes of cognitive transformation and identity reconstruction (Søgaard et al., 2016), which will be discussed in the following section.

### **2.2.2.2 Identity-related theories of desistance from crime**

According to Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph's (2002) theory of cognitive transformation, desistance from crime involves four stages: a cognitive openness to the possibility of change, exposure and reaction to "hooks for change", the envisioning of an appealing "replacement self", and a change in the way delinquent behaviour is viewed (Giordano et al., 2002, pp. 1000-1001). Thus, the would-be desister needs to feel that a change in behaviour is both desirable and necessary, experience and act on a life event or occurrence - for example, marriage - that presents an opportunity for change, imagine themselves in a new prosocial identity, and no longer see their old delinquent behaviour as desirable or relevant (Farrall, Sharpe, Hunter, & Calverley, 2011; Giordano et al., 2002). Empirical research on gang desistance has found some support for this theory: former gang members report that particular aspects of gang involvement – including incarceration and having to commit crime for others – become undesirable to them over time, opening them up to the possibility of change. This tends to occur in conjunction with exposure to "hooks for change", such as having a child, that lead the individual to want to lead a better life for themselves and their family (Chalas & Grekul, 2017; Deane et al., 2007).

In a revision of the theory of cognitive transformation, an emotional dimension was added. According to the revised version, conventional role-taking in good relationships with prosocial partners helps individuals to desist from crime through both emotional and cognitive transformations, where emotional transformation refers to a change in the way anger is understood and regulated (Bachman et al., 2016; Giordano, Schroeder, & Cernkovich, 2007).

Drawing on aspects of Giordano et al.'s (2002, 2007) theory of cognitive transformation, both Vaughan (2007) and Paternoster and colleagues (Paternoster et al., 2016; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009) advance identity-related theories of desistance from crime that give weight to an individual's capacity for personal agency in the process of desistance.

According to Vaughan's (2007) theory, when an individual is confronted with the possibility of changing his/her life, there is an "internal, moral conversation" (p. 309) that takes place which consists of three phases. The first is the discernment phase where possible choices are weighed up against the multiple, persisting concerns around which an individual has up till that point structured a life led by criminal activities. Vaughan (2007) likens this phase to Giordano et al.'s (2002) first two stages of cognitive transformation – openness to change and subsequent exposure to a "hook for change". The second phase is one of deliberation: the individual reviews the advantages and disadvantages of taking particular

courses of action, and compares these to the course of action currently being followed. In other words, the individual compares their current self or identity to the identity or self they wish to pursue. In the final stage, that of dedication, the individual commits to this new identity he/she wish to pursue – an identity which is incompatible with a life of crime. Key to these phases of internal moral conversation is a denouncing of past criminal behaviours that enables the individual to “reconstruct their present and future identities in such a way that will allow for the maintenance of non-offending behaviour” (King, 2013a, p. 152; Vaughan, 2007).

Paternoster and colleagues’ (Paternoster et al., 2016; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009) identity theory of desistance shares similarities with Vaughan’s (2007) theory in its consideration of the importance of personal agency in the process of desistance from crime (Hallett & McCoy, 2015). According to the theory, desistance involves a criminal offender intentionally changing his/her identity (“working self”) while moving away from the “feared self”, and also working towards a more prosocial self (the “possible self”; Paternoster et al., 2016, p. 1206; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009, p. 112-115). The working self refers to the self in the present moment, based on an individual’s existing experiences and self-knowledge (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). The feared self is the self an individual does not want to be or fears becoming, and the possible self is the more positive self the individual wants to become in the future (Paternoster et al., 2016).

Paternoster and Bushway (2009) argue that an individual will maintain a working identity of an offender if he/she perceives that the advantages will outweigh the disadvantages. Over time, however, this identity can become less satisfying “when perceived failures and dissatisfactions within different domains of life become connected and when current failures become linked with anticipated future failures” (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009, p. 1105). These failures and dissatisfactions include feeling that offending is harmful to social relationships, too dangerous and is no longer beneficial financially, and that the costs of imprisonment are too great (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). Desistance from crime comes about once individuals link these costs to their criminal working identity, begin to fear that if they do not change their behaviour they may face a bleak and undesirable future, and also begin to imagine a more positive, prosocial self that they could be in the future (Hallett & McCoy, 2015; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). Until the individual has contemplated and acted on the possible self of non-offender, advancement towards social supports (such as employment) is unlikely to take place. This change in identity is not a single event but rather a slow and gradual process in which human agency is key (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009).

Maruna and colleagues (Farrall & Maruna, 2004; Maruna, 2001; Maruna & Roy, 2007) advance another theory of desistance from crime where personal identity plays a key role, but identity change is not seen as preceding or contributing to desistance (Bachman et al., 2016; Paternoster et al., 2016). A criminal offender – according to the theory – does not change his/her identity from offender to conventional individual; rather, an offender who already has a prosocial view of himself in the present, deliberately reinterprets his past actions “to make previous criminal actions both explicable and consistent with their current favourable views of who they are and what they are ‘really like’” (Bachman et al., 2016, p. 3; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster et al., 2016). In his research with convicted offenders, Maruna (2001) found that those who successfully managed to desist from crime drew on a redemption script: they represented their former criminal selves as a false identity. A positive identity existed all along, but was corrupted by external forces that caused them to engage in crime in order to achieve some form of power (Hallett & McCoy, 2015; Maruna, 2001; Stevens, 2012). With the help of others, they were able to achieve what they were “always meant to do” and sought to “‘give something back’ to society as a sign of gratitude” (Maruna, 2001, p. 87).

While the theories proposed by Maruna and colleagues (Farrall & Maruna, 2004; Maruna, 2001; Maruna & Roy, 2007), Paternoster and colleagues (Paternoster et al., 2016; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009) and Vaughan (2007) have been discussed in relation to understanding gang desistance (see for example Carson and Vecchio (2015)), I could not identify any study in which they had been applied to gang desistance empirical research. Indeed while recent research has begun to integrate gang membership into the life course framework and pay more attention to desistance from gang involvement, a theoretical framing of the *process* of gang desistance has been notably absent (Decker et al., 2014). However, several authors - Berger et al. (2016), Bubolz and Simi (2015) and Decker et al. (2014) - have advanced identity-related theories specific to gang desistance, as will be discussed in the next section.

### **2.2.2.3 Identity-related gang desistance theories**

In exploring gang disengagement amongst 260 former gang members in four United States cities, Decker et al. (2014) draw on Ebaugh’s (1988) theory of role exit identity change which advances a framework for how individuals become “exes” - how they progress from one role to another, and in doing so obtain new identities from these roles (Decker et al., 2014; Ebaugh, 1988). Decker et al.’s (2014) theory – which appears to share some common

features with Giordano et al's (2002) theory of cognitive transformation - involves four stages: first doubts, anticipatory socialisation, turning points, and post-exit validation. These stages may not occur in a linear fashion, and individuals may revert to their former roles (Decker et al., 2014).

First doubts refers to doubts individuals have regarding their current role as a gang member. These may be symbolic or instrumental in nature, and may be present for some time in the back of a gang member's mind. First doubts can include concerns over the moral legitimacy of the gang and violence directed at themselves or others. With anticipatory socialisation individuals start to weigh up the costs and benefits of transitioning to a new role, and imagine themselves in and experiment with these roles by, for instance, participating in a gang outreach programme. While they may look forward to occupying a new role, they can still feel enmeshed in their old role. In the third stage individuals have specific experiences (or turning points) that prompt leaving the gang. These can include moving, becoming a parent, marriage, being exposed to violence, employment, or "hitting bottom" (Decker et al., 2014, p. 269). With the final stage – post-exit validation – individuals' former gang member status is validated, both by the individual and by external groups, such as his/her family, rival gangs, or members of the former gang (Decker et al., 2014).

While not identity related, Densley and Pyrooz (2017) advance a signalling theory of disengagement from gangs that they situate with relation to Decker et al.'s (2014) stages of disengagement theory; in particular, the post-exit validation stage of their theory. According to signalling theory, disengagement starts with signalling, which is followed by screening and then credible commitment. Signalling refers to an individual conveying to others through behaviour or actions that he/she has disengaged from gang involvement. Examples include public expressions of grief or sadness over past gang activities, renouncement of gang membership to others, and voluntarily participating in education and training. Screening refers to the process whereby the receiver of signals (such as a family member or employer) screens out any erroneous information and learns as much as possible about the gang member first. This occurs if the signal has not been received, if it is ambiguous or if the sender of the signal lacks credibility in the eyes of the receiver. The person screening probes for more information by, for example, asking others to vouch for the person claiming to have exited gangsterism, to determine the validity of his/her claim. Beyond signalling, an individual must also commit to the actions he/she has signalled to take, and for these commitments to be believed by others they must be credible (credible commitments). This kind of credibility can be achieved through consistency of action over time. An example of credible commitment

could be taking on stable and full-time employment that is specifically oriented towards helping oneself. This can serve as an example to others that an individual is living out his/her promise of disengagement (Densley & Pyrooz, 2017)

Berger et al. (2016), although they do not label their framework as identity-related, advance a theory that is similar to Decker et al.'s (2014) stages of disengagement theory, based on data from 39 former gang members in San Francisco and Los Angeles. They argue that the general pattern of desistance involves five stages: triggering, contemplation, exploration, exiting and maintenance. The desistance process begins with the experience of significant negative events and – to a lesser extent – positive events that challenge the gang member's worldview, forcing them to explore whether being in the gang fulfils their needs for security and intimacy. Examples of negative events may include being threatened with criminal charges or experiencing violence, while positive events may include getting married or finding employment. In the second stage – contemplation – the gang member starts to question the advantages and disadvantages of being in the gang. Advantages include gaining a sense of safety, reuniting with family and friends, not being threatened or harassed by rival gangs and a reconnection with spirituality and cultural upbringing. However, leaving the gang can also be associated with considerable losses including loss of security, source of income, social status and social support. In the exploration stage alternative lifestyles are explored and the consequences of leaving the gang are evaluated. Alternatives can be explored in a hypothetical way (for instance, sharing with others a desire to change their ways), or more practically (for example, joining religious or community groups). In the exiting stage social contact with gang members is gradually reduced, as is involvement with antisocial activities. Simultaneously the individual starts taking steps towards engaging in more prosocial activities as well as connecting with prosocial peers. In the final stage, that of maintenance, the individual adopts a new identity by joining prosocial organisations (including religious groups and gang-prevention agencies), and also finds new ways to satisfy their social-emotional, security and financial needs by, for instance, adopting a more normative family lifestyle (Berger et al., 2016).

Based on identity theory (rather than empirical data), Bubolz and Simi (2015) present a cognitive-emotional theory of gang desistance that focuses on the role of anger in motivating individuals to explore a change in identity related to their gang involvement. Initially the social identity of the gang (which is an example of a particular group process) may resonate with a gang member, to the point where they set aside their own personal concerns and needs in favour of the group and its norms and criminal activity (Short & Strodtbeck, 1965; Wood,

2014), without questioning it. However, according to Bubolz and Simi's (2015) theory, gang members will begin to feel angry when they become disillusioned with what the gang claims to offer; including protection, a surrogate family, and a source of income. According to the authors, disillusionment refers to unmet expectations that produce a state of discontent that may challenge the “group think” that had previously conditioned their loyalty to the gang (Caya, 2015). When there is a difference between the identity standards associated with the expectations of gang involvement and the actual reality of gangsterism, this interrupts the process of identity development, resulting in social stress, which can include anger (Bubolz & Simi, 2015; Burke, 1991). This process diminishes the significance of the social identity of the gang. Once individuals de-identify with the collective identity as gang member, they start to critically reflect on their lives and past behaviour, and pursue more personal identities (for instance, as a parent, spouse, employee or student) that will help them in self-actualisation. These personal identities may act as filters through which individuals make more informed decisions (Bubolz & Simi, 2015).

#### **2.2.2.4 Interactive theoretical frameworks for understanding desistance from crime**

In recent years there has been some merging between the life course theory of informal social control and identity and cognitive transformation theories (Bottoms et al., 2004), resulting in the emergence of interactive theoretical frameworks. A key theory worth noting here is Thornberry's (1987) interactional theory of delinquency which argues that human behaviour is a result of social interaction and is therefore best understood by frameworks that focus on interactive processes: individuals interact with other people and institutions and their behaviour is formed by these interactive processes (Thornberry, 1987).

Within an interactive theoretical framework desistance is conceptualised as the interplay between human agency and individual choices, and the wider socio-structural context of the individual, including social, societal and institutional factors (Deane et al., 2007; Farrall et al., 2011; King, 2013b). These interactive frameworks have been developed in relation to criminal desistance. However, several gang desistance studies make reference to the importance of understanding desistance from gang involvement as an interplay between agency and structure (Deane et al., 2007; Gormally, 2014; Moloney et al., 2009; Søgaard et al., 2016). For instance, Søgaard et al. (2016) in their study on gang and crime desistance amongst men in a reformatory programme in Denmark, note that structural factors and life

events can act as triggers for desistance, but the individual needs to demonstrate agency and experience these factors and events as meaningful in order for desistance to unfold.

Bottoms et al. (2004) argue that there are five relevant concepts applicable to an interactive framework; namely programmed potential, structures, culture and habitus, situational contexts, and agency. Programmed potential refers to an individual's capacity to commit offences in the future; structures refer to social arrangements (such as employment) that are external to the individual and can support or limit criminal behaviour; culture and habitus refer to shared assumptions, beliefs and values of a culture that can guide and shape criminality and desistance; situational contexts refer to experiences specific to the individual that may prompt a change in behaviour – such as a meaningful relationship with an intimate partner - and agency refers to the individual's subjective experience of desistance (Bottoms et al., 2004; Farrall et al., 2011). Bottoms et al. (2004) stress that within this framework agency needs to be understood within its social context: while attention should be paid to an individual's subjective account, it needs to be recognised that this account is shaped by the individual's context. In a later discussion of this theory, Bottoms (2006) highlights that while the past informs a person's identity, and that this identity is lived in the present, it is also projected into the future. Therefore, a desister may re-orientate their lives in such a way so as to guarantee that they are not tempted to reoffend again. Critically, though, this reorientation is dependent on the opportunities available to the individual in their particular context (Bottoms, 2006; Farrall et al., 2011).

Farrall et al. (2011) advance an integrated theory that shares some similarities to that of Bottoms et al. (2004), but that – the authors feel – furthers Bottoms et al.'s (2004) work. They propose a model to explain the individual and structural-level processes at play in desistance from crime, focusing on macro-level structures, meso-level influences and individual-level processes. Their focus is on “the relationship(s) between a desister's actions (their agency, beliefs and identity) and the structural properties of any social system which shape desistance” (Farrall et al., 2011, p. 229).

At the macro-level they distinguish between broadly unchanging inputs, such as the social institution of the family and influences that are less tangible like collective aspirations and hopes; slowly changing inputs, such as notions of parenthood and marriage and economic situations, and rapidly changing inputs – “shocks to the system” (Farrall et al., 2011, p. 227) such as an economic recession or terrorist attack. There may be interactions between these levels of influence; for instance, a shift in the way in which parenthood is understood will affect the social institution of the family. Individual-level processes consist of background or

past influences including a person's ethnic and gender identity and the nature and length of their past criminal and antisocial career; social interactions and relationships with significant and non-significant others; situational contexts - specific circumstances or events (for example, spending time in prison); experiences with the criminal justice system; the influence of specific social policies; a person's subjective views on relationships and structures, changes in values, willingness or desire to change, and finally, the availability of alternative legitimate identities for former offenders (Farrall et al., 2011).

According to Farrall and colleagues (2011), a key mechanism within the process of desistance is how an individual perceives social structures that may support desistance. How and why people respond differently to the same structural conditions is dependent on emotions such as a person's hopes and aspirations. Thus, as a desister leaves a life of crime, he/she may start to change his/her perceptions of particular social structures, and to reconfigure his/her personal identity to be more in line with them.

### **2.2.2.5 Summary**

Theoretical frameworks for desistance have emphasized the importance of subjective and structural factors to varying degrees. The theory of informal social control stresses the importance of external mechanisms of social control in contributing to desistance. However, a critique of this theory is that it tends to neglect the phenomenology of desistance – that individuals experience and make meaning of their life circumstances differently (Flores, 2016; Maruna, 2001). Identity-related theories, on the other hand, such as the theory of cognitive transformation place more emphasis on an individual's subjective experiences. There is increasing recognition, though, that desistance involves an interplay between *both* structural factors and individual subjectivity, as illustrated in interactive theoretical frameworks. While theories specific to gang desistance are emerging (see, for instance, Decker et al. (2014)), much of the theoretical development of desistance comes from the criminal desistance literature. There is therefore a need to develop theoretical frameworks in relation to desistance from gang involvement specifically; in particular, frameworks that focus on the interaction between individual subjective factors (such as identity and agency) and the individual's social context (such as protective resources in the environment and life events or turning points).

I now turn to the empirical research on gang desistance. I provide a comprehensive review of this literature in order to contextualize the gang desistance findings of this study.

### **2.2.3 Gang desistance research**

International evidence suggests that most gang members tend to desist from gang involvement before the age of 18 years. However, gang membership is not exclusive to adolescents: some gang members who join as adolescents only desist as adults, and other members only become involved as adults (Pyrooz, 2014). In general, leaving the gang is associated with a decrease in positive attitudes towards delinquency and a reduction in delinquent behaviour, including criminal offending and violent acts (Bendixen, Endresen, & Olweus, 2006; Melde & Esbensen, 2014; Melde & Esbensen, 2011; Pyrooz et al., 2015; Scott, 2014; Sweeten et al., 2013). However, desisted gang members are still considered more at risk for antisocial behaviour after exiting from the gang than they were before joining: Melde and Esbenson (2014; using a subsample of the 3,820 youth who participated in the second national evaluation of the G.R.E.A.T. (Gang Resistance Education and Training) programme in the United States) examined the prolonged impact of gang membership. They found that even after leaving the gang, individuals continued to have fewer prosocial and more delinquent friends, lower levels of school commitment, less guilt associated with norm violations, more pro-delinquent attitudes, more unstructured socialising, and a greater anger identity than they had before becoming involved in the gang.

In the sections that follow I look at the empirical research on motives for and methods of gang desistance, the process of gang desistance, and the role social support systems and identity (including masculine identity and fatherhood identity) may play in desistance.

#### **2.2.3.1 Motives for and methods of gang desistance**

Many of the gang desistance studies to date have concentrated on the motives for and methods of gang desistance. Motives refer to the subjective reasoning of former gang members as to why they decide to leave their gangs (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). They can be classified into push and pull factors, with push factors being internal to the individual or the gang, and pull factors external to the individual (Carson & Vecchio, 2015). Push factors can facilitate the process of desistance because they depict the gang environment as unappealing. Pull factors give gang members alternatives to the gang life (Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011). Evidence suggests that there are no substantive differences across male and females when it comes to motives for gang desistance (O’Neal et al., 2016; Peterson & Panfil, 2014)

Common push factors cited by former gang members in their decision to exit the gang life include: experiencing personal or vicarious victimisation (Berger et al., 2016; Bubolz,

2014; Carson et al., 2013; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Decker et al., 2014; Fast, 2013; Mandel, 2006; Rice, 2015; Roman et al., 2017); fearing the danger associated with being in a gang (Bolden, 2013); feeling burnt out, fed up with or tired of the gang lifestyle (Berger et al., 2016; Descormiers, 2013; O’Neal et al., 2016); becoming frustrated by or wanting to avoid the troubles of gang activity, including restricted mobility, violence, police harassment and incarceration or criminal justice system involvement (Berger et al., 2016; Bolden, 2013; Chu et al., 2015; Deane et al., 2007; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011; Goodwill & Ishiyama, 2016; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011); experiencing the death of a close friend or family member (Bolden, 2013) or having a near death experience themselves (Descormiers, 2013); feeling disillusioned by the gang (Roman et al., 2017) – including feeling exploited, unsupported (for instance, if gang members do not visit them while in prison), and as though the gang is no longer loyal to them (Bailey, 2015; Berger et al., 2016; Bubolz, 2014; Chalas & Grekul, 2017; Chu et al., 2015; McLean et al., 2017); having a fallout with the gang (Chu et al., 2015) and no longer seeing the value of remaining in the gang (Carson et al., 2013; Chu et al., 2015; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Some of these push factors are echoed in the limited South African gang desistance literature<sup>7</sup>, with former gang members citing the death of a close family member, fear of prosecution and fear of safety for oneself and one’s family, and feelings of disillusionment with the gang as reasons for desisting (Daniels & Adams, 2010; Wijnberg & Green, 2014).

Pull factors that play a role in the process of desistance include: experiencing a religious or cultural awakening (Berger et al., 2016; Bolden, 2013; Bubolz, 2014); maturational processes like getting married or entering into a committed relationship (Berger et al., 2016; Bolden, 2013; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011; Muñoz, 2014), getting an education (Bolden, 2013) or an employment opportunity (Berger et al., 2016; Bolden, 2013; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011) and, relatedly upholding the responsibility associated with that employment (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011; Roman et al., 2017); maturing out of the gang lifestyle (Berger et al., 2016; Bolden, 2013; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011); upholding responsibilities to one’s family (Berger et al., 2016; Chalas & Grekul, 2017; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011; Goodwill & Ishiyama, 2016; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Roman et al., 2017); wanting a better life or future (Bolden, 2013; Chalas & Grekul, 2017; Chu et al., 2015) and desiring more independence (Descormiers, 2013); wanting to improve relationships with friends and family (Chu et al., 2015; Goodwill & Ishiyama, 2016); moving away or moving schools

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<sup>7</sup> The South African studies on gang desistance will be discussed in more detail in section 2.4.

(Carson, Melde, Wiley, & Esbensen, 2017; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011; Descormiers, 2013; Muñoz, 2014), and fatherhood (Berger et al., 2016; Deane et al., 2007; Decker et al., 2014; Muñoz, 2014). Some of these findings are echoed in the limited South African literature: wanting an improved lifestyle, fatherhood, entering into a committed romantic relationship and turning to religion appear to be key factors in supporting gang desistance (Daniels & Adams, 2010; Rodgers & Jensen, 2015; Steinberg, 2004; Wijnberg & Green, 2014).

The role of fatherhood as a turning point in the desistance process was explored in more detail by Moloney et al. (2009) in their study with 91 former gang members in San Francisco. For many participants, becoming a father facilitated a process of evaluation of their past gang and crime activities – weighing up the pros and cons - and future priorities, with fatherhood providing them with a new priority: someone to care for and about. This also led to an emotional transformation in which participants felt more at ease, less impulsive, less prone to violence, and as a result better able to resist the pressure or temptation to return to the gang life. Some participants noted that the responsibilities associated with fatherhood led to a reorganisation of their time, which meant fewer chances to participate in gang-related activities. Others argued that fatherhood motivated them to desist because they wished to be positive role models for their children (Moloney et al., 2009).

With regards to female gang members, the evidence regarding motherhood as a possible exit strategy is mixed (O’Neal et al., 2016). Some research has found no support for the argument that motherhood supports desistance (Varriale, 2008), while other research shows that pregnancy is a primary reason given by former gang members for leaving the gang (Fleisher & Krienert, 2004). Further, Pyrooz et al. (2017) found that becoming a mother for the first time was associated with an enduring decrease in the likelihood of claiming gang membership and the rate of offending amongst female participants. However, having a second child promoted a *temporary* reduction in offending. Interestingly, amongst male participants, those who became fathers showed significant reductions in their claim to gang membership and their offending rate only if they lived with the child, thus indicating that whether or not fatherhood promotes gang leaving may be dependent on the level of parental involvement (Pyrooz et al., 2017).

While push and pull factors may operate independently, it is more common that they operate in tandem, with a gang member typically experiencing multiple motivations for wanting to leave the gang (Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Chalas & Grekul, 2017; Roman et al., 2017). For instance, in Decker and Pyrooz’s (2011) study with 177 current, former and non-

gang members in California and Missouri, a number of former gang members spoke of how the pressures associated with the gang life (including being arrested, repeatedly stopped by the police, and feeling under a constant threat of victimisation) came to be too overwhelming: “These pressures, coupled with increasing family and job responsibilities, laid the groundwork for getting out of the gang life” (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011, p. 13).

How a person leaves the gang is often categorised into passive or hostile methods (Carson et al., 2013; Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). The hostile method of “blood in blood out” (that one has to kill in order to join the gang, and cannot leave the gang unless one is killed) is often perpetuated through the media and gang lore (Carson & Vecchio, 2015, p. 264). Many former gang members in Decker and Pyrooz’s (2011) study felt that being “beaten out” (enduring violence at the hands of one’s gang members) of the gang or having to commit a crime in order to leave were myths of gangsterism that, if they had any basis in the real world, would only be applicable to younger gang members who wanted to exit the gang life after a short period of time before having put enough “work” into the gang (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011, p. 12). Most ex-gang members – both male and female – noted that the process of exiting was an informal and passive one, in that they simply walked away from the gang or stopped visiting the gang and faded out (Bolden, 2012, 2013; Carson et al., 2013; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). This is supported by some South African literature (Daniels & Adams, 2010).

However, some former gang members have reported more hostile or violent methods of leaving, including having to fight or commit a crime in order to leave (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011), and experiencing violent responses from their gang when they tell them of their decision to leave (Bolden, 2013; Rice, 2015). Whether or not a desisting gang member faces hostility from his gang may be dependent on his motives for desistance. For instance, former gang members in Pyrooz and Decker’s (2011) study who left their gangs due to employment or family responsibilities did not face any resistance from their gangs, whereas those who left as a result of growing tired of the gang life or to avoid further trouble or violence did experience some violence when leaving.

After desisting, there may be a continued risk of experiencing violence: one-third of the 260 former gang members in Decker et al.’s (2014) study were attacked by rival gangs after having left their gangs, and three quarters experienced police gang-related harassment. However, other research shows no indication of negative sanctions as a result of leaving (Bolden, 2012; Carson et al., 2013; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011). The experience of violent victimisation may depend on the social and emotional ties desisted gang members have with

their former gang – those who retain ties with their gang have been found to be twice as likely to endure victimisation (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011)

### **2.2.3.2 The process of gang desistance**

Some scholars, such as Berger et al. (2016) and Decker et al. (2014), have moved beyond only studying the motives for and methods of exiting the gang, to exploring the process or pattern of desisting from the gang, which can be situated within a life course framework. The process of gang desistance may be triggered by particular turning points within the life-course - doubts or concerns over the gang life and one's future. Former gang members report experiencing concerns over the moral legitimacy of their gang, their future with their family, violence experienced by themselves or others and being threatened with criminal justice charges, and therefore possible incarceration (Berger et al., 2016; Deane et al., 2007; Decker et al., 2014; Fast, 2013; Johnson, 2013). These experiences prompt reflection – often while in prison or in hospital (Johnson, 2013; Rice, 2015) - amongst former gang members on the gang lifestyle and whether it is satisfying their needs for intimacy and security (Berger et al., 2016; Rice, 2015). Initially, these doubts and concerns may not be acted on; rather, the pros and cons of being a gang member are contemplated and alternative options to being in the gang are considered (Berger et al., 2016; Decker et al., 2014; Gormally, 2014). If the gang member feels that investing in the social identity of the gang will continue to benefit their own identity or sense of agency they may continue with their membership, but if investing in the gang is no longer providing identity and agency enhancement through the provision of, for example, social or economic capital, they are likely to leave the gang (Gormally, 2014).

Former gang members also report that more positive turning points - such as becoming a father or finding employment - prompts reflection on their gang lifestyle (Berger et al., 2016; Moloney et al., 2009) or results in them deciding to leave the gang (Decker et al., 2014). In some cases, these kinds of turning points may interact with the realisation that the possible consequences of gang involvement – specifically, incarceration – are not what they wish for in their lives, leading to a move away from gangsterism (Chalas & Grekul, 2017; Deane et al., 2007). Importantly, opportunities to desist (like employment or fatherhood) may arise but not be immediately acted on by the individual (Deane et al., 2007; Moloney et al., 2009). Fatherhood or employment alone is not sufficient to bring about desistance: individuals need to be at a developmental stage in their lives where they feel ready to

embrace a new role, and have the desire to commit to it. Such decisions require choice and agency (Moloney et al., 2009)

Before officially disengaging from the gang, individuals may explore or experiment with alternative lifestyles – for instance, by joining a gang outreach programme (Berger et al., 2016; Decker et al., 2014). After this exploration stage, individuals gradually reduce their involvement with the gang by no longer participating in antisocial activities or socially engaging with the gang, while simultaneously pursuing a more prosocial lifestyle and identity (Berger et al., 2016). A final stage in the desistance process is post-exit validation of one's former gang member status: this comes from within the individual and also from external groups including the family members, members of the former gang, rival gangs and even the police (Decker et al., 2014). If the identity change from being a gang member to being a former gang member is not recognised and validated by others it can complicate desistance. Treating and labelling individuals as gang members can make it very difficult for them to desist completely (Gormally, 2014).

### **2.2.3.3 Support systems**

There is increasing recognition of the important role that support systems play in gang desistance, including support from loved ones, the wider community and religious institutions and belief systems. For example, former gang members – both in South Africa and internationally - report that support from family members, partners, friends, older gang members, and mentors from the community (such as a priest or a probation officer) helped them in disengaging from gang involvement (Albert, 2008; Chalas & Grekul, 2017; Daniels & Adams, 2010; Decker et al., 2014; Fast, 2013; Goodwill & Ishiyama, 2016; Mandel, 2006; Muñoz, 2014; O'Neal et al., 2016; Rice, 2015; Steinberg, 2004).

Evidence suggests that gang members may need support from multiple sources when desisting (Decker et al., 2014): former gang members in O'Neal et al.'s (2016) study reported that they were assisted by approximately three sources of help when exiting the gang. Interestingly, though, the majority of participants noted that social services played no role in their desistance. Whether or not a system – such as a social service agency or a family - supports desistance may depend on the quality of the relationship the desisting gang member has with the individual(s) involved. For example, some former gang members in Mandel's (2006) study felt that because of negative experiences with their parents (for example, relationships with limited attention and affection), their parents did not have any impact on their decision to exit gangsterism.

When it comes to the kind of social support offered to desisting gang members, relationships that are emotionally supportive, caring, non-judgmental and allow the individual to feel important, acknowledged and valued may be particularly important (Mandel, 2006; Muñoz, 2014; Rice, 2015). Through this kind of supportive relationship with others, desisting gang members can learn how to mentalise (interpret and give meaning to their own and others' behaviour through understanding mental and emotional states) which can lead to improved impulse control, self-monitoring, social intelligence, and the ability to regulate mood (Mandel, 2006).

The support offered through being part of a social group may also be beneficial when it comes to desistance from gang involvement, particularly in light of the fact that leaving the gang can result in the loss of companionship and support from peers (Mandel, 2006; Moloney et al., 2009). For example, amongst Aboriginal former gang members in Canada, being a member of a native brotherhood fostered group connections that facilitated a sense of belonging and supported a gang-free life (Goodwill & Ishiyama, 2016). Relatedly, participating in Aboriginal traditions and ceremonies helped former gang members in Deane et al.'s (2007) study in making a break from criminal activity. Being part of a religious social group may also support gang desistance. For example, church worship services that are participatory can create a profound sense of belonging for members (Flores, 2009), and the new relationships and social networks that are formed through being part of a religious institution can offer emotional and practical support (Brenneman, 2014; Rice, 2015). Interestingly, leaving the gang to become religious, seems to be respected by gangs – particularly in a South African context - so long as the converted individual shows evidence of a real change (Brenneman, 2014; Daniels & Adams, 2010; Rodgers & Jensen, 2015; Wijnberg & Green, 2014).

#### **2.2.3.4 Identity**

Along with the recognition of the role social support systems like the family and religion can play in gang desistance, there is also an increasing emphasis on the role identity plays in facilitating desistance from gangsterism. Indeed as noted in section 2.2.2.3, several identity-related theories of gang desistance have been advanced (Berger et al., 2016; Bubolz & Simi, 2015; Decker et al., 2014).

While it has been argued that desistance does not necessarily need to involve a significant change in identity in order for someone to be considered a true desister (Bottoms et al., 2004), identity transformation still seems to be an important component of gang

desistance for many ex-gang members, as a desisting gang member moves away from their identity as a gangster and forms a new identity that gives him/her a positive sense of self (Deane et al., 2007; Glowacki, 2013; Muñoz, 2014). For example, a former gang member may embrace a fatherhood identity (Moloney et al., 2009; Muñoz, 2014). Gangsterism can provide men with a particular form of masculine identity that is marked by aggression and violence, while fatherhood provides an alternative masculine identity: one that is characterised, for example, by being a good provider, a protector and a teacher (Moloney et al., 2009). Taking up this identity can enable former gang members to dissociate from the more destructive masculinity often associated with the gangsterism. However, completely enacting the father identity may be difficult: while former gang members may feel motivated to earn a legitimate income and provide for their family, they may not realistically be in a position in which they can do this (Moloney et al., 2009). Recovering gang members in Flores' (2016) study who were physically disabled as a result of gang violence reported being frustrated at not being able to perform dominant expressions of masculinity. Those who are able to provide for their families, though, are likely to experience not only economic benefits, but symbolic benefits too as through being employed a former gang member can achieve status and show others that he is making positive changes in his life (Søgaard et al., 2016). Further, there is evidence to suggest that desisting gang members who exit the gang in order to provide for their families do not experience a hostile response from their gang (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011).

Along with fatherhood, another masculine identity that may support former gang members in their desistance is one of responsibility and independence. In their study on gang and crime desistance Deuchar et al. (2016) found that the institutional use of boxing at a rehabilitation centre in Denmark functioned as a means by which men could construct a positive self-image characterised by agency, independence, strength, determinedness and self-control. Interestingly, the use of boxing also provided a context for these men to engage in counselling and learn how to express their feelings and vulnerabilities. However, some of the former gang members also discussed feeling caught in between competing identities: while they had a desire to be reformed and responsible men, they also felt a commitment to stay loyal friends to their gang brothers (Søgaard et al., 2016). This could be illustrative of role residual – carrying part of one's former identity in the progression into a new identity (Bubolz, 2014).

Another masculine identity which can support desistance is what Søgaard et al. (2016) call “reformed masculinity” (p. 2). Many of the men in their study either aspired to or were

involved in varying forms of mentorship work. Through this work they were able to “reinforce their own sense of reforming and to construct an identity as mature men involved in responsible nurturing and guidance of ‘younger generations’” (Søgaard et al., 2016, p. 14). Former gang members in other studies report that guiding youngsters by helping them to stay out of gangsterism and crime was important to them (Goodwill & Ishiyama, 2016; Muñoz, 2014).

### **2.2.3.5 Summary**

International evidence, and the limited evidence from South African research, gives us a fair understanding of the motives for and methods of gang desistance, the process or pattern of desistance and the role support systems and identity may play in desistance. However, what is missing from this evidence is an-depth understanding of how protective resources within an individual and within his/her environment may support gang desistance and, in particular, how individuals draw on these resources; in other words, the interaction between the individual and the environment in the process of desistance. The interactional theoretical frameworks developed in the context of crime desistance can play a key role in shedding light on these processes. So too can the notion of resilience, which is the focus of the following section. Below I give an overview of resilience and how it overlaps with desistance, how resilience has been defined, the notion of hidden resilience and finally, resilience in the context of crime and gangsterism. I review this literature in light of the fact that I use the lens of resilience in how I conceptualise gang desistance.

## **2.3 Resilience**

Resilience is a much broader concept than desistance that has been used largely in the context of youth development (Fitzpatrick, 2011). It has been examined in relation to a number of topics including divorce, natural disasters, war, trauma, violence, mental health and antisocial behaviour (Bartol, 2008; Berger, 2017; Frankenberg, Sikoki, Sumantri, Suriastini, & Thomas, 2013; Masten, 2001; Tol, Song, & Jordans, 2013; Ungar, 2011). Despite much debate amongst researchers concerning its conceptualisation (Bottrell, 2009), resilience has generally been defined as positive or successful adaptation in the context of severe adversity or risk that may threaten the stability, viability or development of an individual (or other developmental systems, such as the micro or macro system; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten, 2001, 2011, 2014, 2016).

While the notions of resilience and desistance have largely developed quite separately and within different disciplines – desistance within the fields of criminology and criminal justice, and resilience largely within developmental psychology and social work – there is considerable overlap with regards to the underlying mechanisms that allow the processes to unfold and in terms of the practical implications the processes have for working with vulnerable youth (Fitzpatrick, 2011). More specifically, there is increasing recognition in the desistance and resilience literature that both processes involve an interaction between the personal agency of the individual and his/her specific socio-cultural context (Farrall et al., 2010; Fitzpatrick, 2011; Ungar, 2008). Protective resources within the environment, such as access to social support and education, as well as life events, like marriage and employment, facilitate the processes of desistance and resilience, but these resources and opportunities need to be actively drawn on by the individual, and he/she needs to experience them as meaningful and desirable, in order for desistance or resilience to unfold (King, 2013b; Liebregts et al., 2015; Rungay, 2004; Søgaard et al., 2016; Ungar, 2008). A further similarity between the two concepts is their optimistic recognition and emphasis on potentially positive futures, in spite of what may have happened in the past (Fitzpatrick, 2011; Robertson, Campbell, Hill, & McNeill, 2006). Thus, rather than only focusing on deficits, problem behaviour and pathology, resilience and desistance research emphasize “the capacity of individuals to overcome adversity and to be robust – in the context of a wider, supportive environment” (Fitzpatrick, 2011, p. 230).

Where resilience and desistance differ is that resilience is a much broader concept and thus potentially has wider application (Fitzpatrick, 2011). While desistance draws attention to the process of disengaging from a life of crime and gangsterism (Decker et al., 2014; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011) and, as argued by authors like Maruna (2001), maintaining a crime or gang-free lifestyle in spite of the challenges life presents, resilience has the potential to draw attention not only to the process of desistance, but also to how individuals overcome and manage the challenges associated with this process. Thus, if gang desistance is studied using a resilience lens, both leaving the gang and maintaining reform, as well as managing the challenges and risks associated with these processes (such as the loss of a social network and source of income) can be explored.

Attention was first drawn to resilience by psychologists and psychiatrists during the 1970s and 1980s (Masten, 2001, 2016; Ungar, 2011). Seminal work by North American scholars like Werner and Smith (1982), Garmezy (1983) and Rutter (1987) highlighted the dynamic nature of the protective processes involved in resilience, shifting the focus of the

field from individual personality traits of what were originally thought to be invulnerable children (Anthony, 1987), to interactional processes in difficult environments (Ungar, 2011). Similar to the field of desistance, existing theories of resilience have originated largely from high-income countries (Masten & Wright, 2010; Theron, 2012). There has therefore been a call for exploration into the processes of resilience from Afrocentric and other non-western contexts (Theron, 2012). Indeed resilience research in developing nations like South Africa is growing (see for example Dass-Brailsford (2005); Leoschut and Burton (2009); Malindi and Theron (2010) and Theron (2016)). I now turn to how resilience has been defined, and then to resilience research on crime and gang membership.

### **2.3.1 Defining resilience**

Initially, resilience research used a person-focused conceptualisation of resilience, limiting its attention to the personal qualities of individuals that enabled resilience (Bartol, 2008; Luthar et al., 2000; Van Rensburg, Theron, & Rothmann, 2015), including personality traits and dispositional and biological characteristics of the individual (Theron & Theron, 2010). The danger of this conceptualisation is that it tends to place the responsibility for resilience on the individual (Theron, 2012; Van Rensburg et al., 2015). However, over time researchers came to realise that resilience also derives from factors within the individual's environment (Luthar et al., 2000; Ungar, 2008). As a result, resilience is now understood as a transactional process involving protective resources located both within the individual, and within his/her family, community and political setting (Theron & Malindi, 2010; Van Rensburg et al., 2015). This process involves both the ability of an individual to actively seek out psychological, social, cultural and physical resources that will promote his/her health and well-being, as well as his/her capacity to negotiate for these resources to be experienced in a culturally meaningful way (Theron, 2016; Theron & Theron, 2010; Ungar, 2004a, 2004b, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2012; Ungar, Ghazinour, & Richter, 2013). Accordingly, while individual agency is a key component of the resilience process, it is the role of the individual's socio-ecological context - their families, communities and governments - to ensure that these resources are available in culturally meaningful ways that reflect the preferences of those who need them (Ungar, 2012).

Furthermore although there are generic mechanisms that seem to inform resilience; such as self-regulation, intelligence, being able to access material resources, having a sense of belonging and social and/or spiritual cohesion, adherence to cultural norms and beliefs, social justice and constructive relationships and healthy attachments (Masten & Wright, 2010;

(Theron, 2016; Ungar et al., 2007; Ungar et al., 2013), these mechanisms are shaped by the social context within which they occur (Theron, 2012, 2016; Ungar, 2006, 2012). In the past two decades there has been an increasing recognition of the importance of examining not only what the individual does but how the individual's environment can facilitate and support resilience: While an individual exposed to adversity or risk may be motivated to enhance their well-being, if he/she does not have access to protective resources within the environment, his/her potential to succeed will be seriously impeded (Ungar, 2015).

Along with the recognition that resilience is shaped by the environment, there is also some acknowledgment of the role identity can play in supporting resilience. More specifically, the formation of positive identities can promote resilience in youngsters facing adversity in that youth can draw on protective resources while exploring and committing to developing identities (Chen, Lau, Tapanya, & Cameron, 2012; Webb et al., 2017). For example, an adolescent who takes on a religious identity has access to particular beliefs that can provide moral guidance and psychological security (Chen et al., 2012).

The risk or adversity side of the definition of resilience has been variously defined, including a focus on socioeconomic status, life events (such as divorce or the death of a parent), community trauma or violence, and low birth weight or premature birth (Masten, 2001; Van Rensburg et al., 2015). There is also recognition that single risk indicators do not necessarily reflect the reality of exposure to adversity, as often people experience multiple risk factors. This has led to the development of measures that look at cumulative risk or adverse experiences (Masten, 2014). Importantly, people may be considered resilient with regards to some kinds of risk but not others, and may demonstrate positive adaptation in relation to some outcomes but not all (Rutter, 2007). Relatedly, different people perceive and respond to the same risk conditions or adversity in different ways (Masten, 2011). Further, what constitutes risk or adversity involves a value judgement on the part of the researcher (Bottrell, 2009).

Much controversy exists as to the standards by which positive adaptation should be defined: some emphasize that an individual should present with an absence of psychopathology or a low level of impairment in order to be considered resilient (in other words, to have adapted positively), while others - in particular developmental investigators - argue that a resilient individual must meet a particular society's expectations, given his/her age and situation. Others have included both sets of criteria (Masten, 2001, 2014). As Masten (2014, p. 13) notes "defining positive adaptation involves implicit or explicit value judgements or criteria about desirable adaptation". These judgements are influenced by the

sociocultural and historical context, as well as the particular focus of a research study (Masten, 2014). A related issue is whether external adaptation criteria (for instance, academic success or the absence of delinquent behaviour) or internal adaptation criteria (such as well-being or limited distress), or both, should be used when it comes to assessing positive adaptation (Masten, 2001).

This debate highlights the relativity of resilience: a set of behaviours (such as gang involvement) may be considered delinquent or disordered in one context, but seen as functional or even prosocial in another (Drapeau, Saint-Jacques, Lepine, Begin, & Bernard, 2007; Ungar, 2012). There have therefore been calls from authors like Ungar (2004a, 2004b, 2011) and Berger (2017) for a phenomenological and social constructionist understanding of resilience that acknowledges that there is a plurality of contextually different and culture specific definitions of what is considered adversity and what it means to adapt positively to that adversity. This has led to the development of the term “hidden” or atypical resilience (Ungar, 2004b).

### **2.3.2 Hidden resilience**

Hidden or atypical resilience refers to behaviours or patterns of living that may not conform to traditional psychological theories of behaviour that are considered socially appropriate - and that may even be deemed problematic or antisocial by society at large - but that nonetheless encourage young people to overcome adversity or hardship (Hurley, Martin, & Hallberg, 2013; Malindi & Theron, 2010; Ungar, 2004b). For instance, marginalised youth with limited or no access to resources in their environment that can promote their well-being may actively look for alternative ways of enhancing their well-being (thereby demonstrating agency). For example, they may use truancy, violence, fighting or criminal activities as a means for survival, to resist or contest a system that labels them as criminals, to create safe spaces for themselves, to achieve success, to be respected by and create relationships with their peers and to find a sense of belonging (Bottrell, 2009; Hine & Welford, 2012; Munford & Sanders, 2008; Rios, 2012; Ungar, 2004b, 2011). This is consistent with the literature on how gang membership can be used as a way to actively resist authority and reject social labels (Rios, 2012).

In addition, marginalised youth may become involved with gangs because the gang can offer safety as well as social and economic adaption to community poverty or a hostile environment (Fleisher, 2009; Solis, 2003; Ungar, 2004b; Wijnberg & Green, 2014). This might be particularly relevant in a South African context where unemployment, economic

instability and social insecurity are high in various communities across the country (Standing, 2006). Indeed in poverty-stricken and high violence areas youth may well join gangs as a literal means of survival (Daniels & Adams, 2010; Owen & Greeff, 2015). Thus, it is important to note that while desistance from gang involvement can be seen as a conventional form of resilience, joining a gang may be considered atypical or hidden resilience, particularly in a context of limited protective resources.

I now turn to the literature on resilience in the context of criminality and gang involvement.

### **2.3.3 Resilience to crime and gang membership**

While it has been argued that resilience is poorly understood in relation to antisocial behaviour (Fougere, Daffern, & Thomas, 2012), there is an increasing recognition that resilience research and theory may have much to add in understanding the process of desistance (Fitzpatrick, 2011). Below I discuss how resilience has been theoretically conceptualised in desistance-related studies as well as empirical research on gang and crime desistance research that has drawn on resilience.

#### **2.3.3.1 Conceptualisations of resilience**

There is some debate as to whether resilience should be limited to those who have never succumbed to risk factors or displayed behavioural problems (for instance, individuals who are considered at risk for joining a gang or committing crime but do not - see, for example, Murray (2010) - or whether resilience can be conceptualised in broader terms, as successful adaptation *after* a time of maladaptation or developmental difficulty (for instance, individuals who do join a gang or commit crime but who later desist - see, for example, Stubbs (2014)). Authors like Einat, Ronel, and Zemel (2015) argue for the use of both conceptualisations. In their study on the effect of resilience and introspection on abstention and desistance from violent offending, Einat et al. (2015) proposed that resilience could be applied to what they called stable adolescents: those who abstain from deviant behaviour despite being exposed to multiple risk factors, as well as to adolescents limited to temporary delinquent behaviour: those who desist from criminal activities and go on to lead normal lives.

Other authors have applied a resilience framework only to those at risk of engaging in delinquency but do not. For instance, Born, Chevalier, and Humblet (1997) defined resilient youth as those who had only committed minor or sporadic delinquent acts, despite being

exposed to multiple risk factors. Similarly, Murray (2010) argued that the term resilience could be used in the context of youth at risk for offending but who resist (what she terms "active resilience" p. 118). Drawing on Rumgay (2004) and Gilgun (2005), Murray (2010) argues that in this context resilience should be seen as a process (as opposed to a personality trait of an individual) in which individuals actively draw on protective resources available to them in their environment. Non-offenders who engage in active resilience are seen as social actors who exercise agency in employing strategies to actively resist offending.

Other authors who have applied a resilience framework to youth at risk of offending but do not, have focused on specific protective factors that may promote resilience. For example, Black-Hughes and Stacy (2013) hypothesized that multiple attachments to significant others may act as a protective factor amongst youth resilient to offending, while Gardner, Dishion, and Connell (2008) argued that self-regulation (purposive control of attention and behaviour) may serve to protect youth from the negative influences of peer delinquency, thereby preventing involvement in antisocial behaviour.

Some authors have conceptualised resilience as applying to those who engage in criminal activity or gangsterism, but later desist. For example, Fougere et al. (2012) explores resilience amongst young people considered at risk for re-offending, arguing that typically resilience includes self-efficacy, perseverance, good social and communication skills, as well as supportive family, community and peer environments. However, while acknowledging that resilience is often conceptualised as a process, Fougere et al. (2012) choose to view it as a trait or characteristic, arguing that this is how it has been conceptualised in the forensic domain. Contrastingly, in her study on resilience to re-offending Stubbs (2014; drawing on Ungar, 2004b) argues that resilience should be understood as an interactive process that considers both the individual's subjective perception of risk, the resources the individual's context can provide, and the interaction between the two.

With regards to gang desistance, Albert (2008), in her study on the resilience of former gang members, defines resilience as developmental (occurring over time), dynamic (involving the interplay between the individual and the environment), sustainable (its effects persist over time), and transformative (enabling the individual to thrive). Albert (2008) notes that "gang members who have chosen to terminate their gang affiliation are examples of the engagement of resilience in overcoming tremendous odds" (p. 35). In their study on gangsterism in South Africa, Daniels and Adams (2010) acknowledge the challenge in defining resilience given the many factors that can play a role in facilitating it, including

trusting relationships, emotional support, hope and a belief in religion and morality. They also highlight the importance of rooting resilience within its particular cultural context.

As is seen above, some authors limit the focus of resilience to those who are at risk for engaging in crime or gangsterism but do not, while others apply it more broadly to include individuals who do engage in crime or gangsterism but later desist. In the following section I explore the application of these two conceptualisations of resilience to empirical research on criminality and gang involvement.

### **2.3.3.2 Resilience research on criminality and gang involvement**

With regards to resilience amongst youth considered at risk for engaging in antisocial behaviour but who do not, research shows that social support may be a key aspect to their resilience. This includes strong social networks characterised by a high degree of trust (Boeck, Fleming, & Kemshall, 2008) and close relationships or bonds with family members or other significant adults (including teachers; Black-Hughes & Stacy, 2013; Born et al., 1997; Stacy, 2006; Tiet et al., 2010). Other factors that reportedly predict resilience to risk of antisocial behaviour include self-regulation (purposive control of attention and behaviour; Gardner et al., 2008), having a positive attitude for the future (Boeck et al., 2008; Murray, 2010), high levels of maturity and low levels of aggression (Born et al., 1997), involvement in extracurricular activities, experiencing fewer adverse life events, lower levels of parental discord, and being less involved with delinquent peers (Murray, 2010; Tiet et al., 2010). Further, non-offending youth can engage in strategies to demonstrate their resistance to offending, including “othering” offenders by being dismissive of them and/or talking in derogatory ways about them, thus creating a clear boundary between themselves and offenders (Murray, 2010).

Similar to resilience amongst at risk youth, social support systems appear to play an important role in the resilience of young people who engaged in crime and gangsterism but who later desisted: Criminal offenders and gang members who are successful in desisting from crime and gang involvement have been characterised as having access to emotional and social support from family members, social services in the community, and other prosocial adults such as counsellors or religious leaders (Albert, 2008; Carr & Vandiver, 2001; Daniels & Adams, 2010; Kelly & Ward, 2012; Lodewijks et al., 2010; Stubbs, 2014; Todis et al., 2001). Conversely, however, Fougere et al. (2012) found that having a supportive family and prosocial peers did not predict resilience amongst young adult offenders. In fact, only absence of a mental health diagnosis contributed significantly to resilience. The authors

conclude that resilience as a construct “is more complex than simply a collection of protective factors” (Fougere et al., 2012, p. 715).

Other protective resources that appear to play a role in the resilience process of desisting offenders include structure in the home environment, a positive attitude towards rules and authority, academic competence, being more verbal and reflective, religious beliefs, good problem-solving skills, understanding one’s past criminal behaviour, mentoring others, having a sense of purpose, a positive outlook and approach to life, and a strong desire and determination to change one’s behaviour and focus on a positive future (Carr & Vandiver, 2001; Harris, 2016; Jain et al., 2014; Kelly & Ward, 2012; Stubbs, 2014; Todis et al., 2001). When it comes to desisting gang members, along with access to social support (as noted above), other factors that appear to play a role in the process of resilience include accepting full responsibility for past actions as a gang member, taking responsibility for one’s current situation and having a clear sense of purpose or motivation for committing to desistance (Albert, 2008).

In summary, resilience research on criminality and gang involvement indicates that a number of protective resources both within the individual (for instance, having a positive attitude for the future) and his/her environment (for example, social support from loved ones) may play a role in supporting both youth at risk for engaging in delinquency but do not, and desisting youth. What is largely missing from this research, though, is the conceptualisation of resilience as an interactional process in which the individual actively seeks out and draws on protective resources within the environment and within him/herself, and negotiates for these resources to be provided in meaningful ways (Ungar, 2012). What is also missing from these studies is an exploration of the challenges and risks associated with the desistance process. Individuals desisting from a life of crime or gangsterism are likely to face an array of difficulties including, for example, isolation as a result of losing a social network, as well as a loss of income and, relatedly, difficulty in finding legitimate employment as a result of the stigma attached to being a former gang member or criminal offender (Berger et al., 2016; Cooper & Ward, 2012; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016; Søgaard et al., 2016)

A further limitation is that much of the resilience research on delinquency – like the research on gang desistance - has been conducted in high-income countries, where socioeconomic conditions are very different to those of low- and middle-income countries. South Africa, for example, has a long history of social exclusion that we are struggling to overcome. While there have been positive developments and improvements in the lives of South Africans since the transition into a democracy in the early 1990s, the country is still

characterised by high rates of poverty, unemployment and inequality, with black and coloured populations suffering the most (Rispel, Molomo, & Dumela, 2008). For example, the proportion of black and coloured people living below the poverty line (R647 – roughly 53 US dollars) in 2015 was 47.1 percent and 23.3 percent respectively in 2015, while only 0.4 percent of white people were reported to be below the poverty line (Statistics South Africa, 2017b). In 2017 the unemployment rate across the general population was 27.7 percent. For black people this rate was 31.1 percent, for coloured people it was 24 percent, and for whites it was 7.6 percent (Statistics South Africa, 2017a). In comparison, the United States unemployment rate for the general population was reported to be 4.1 percent in 2017 and its poverty rate was 12.5 percent (Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2017; Semega, Fontenot, & Kollar, 2017). These socioeconomic factors are likely to play a role in the formation and the nature of gangs and, thus, the process of gang desistance (Higginson & Benier, 2015). For instance, youngsters growing up in poverty-stricken areas in South Africa may join gangs as a means of survival (Daniels & Adams, 2010; Owen & Greeff, 2015), which could make desisting from gang involvement all the more difficult if legitimate means of earning an income are not available. It is therefore important to understand the desistance process followed by former gang members in a context of – for instance - limited (or no) employment opportunities and high rates of poverty and inequality.

The few studies that have explored gang desistance in South Africa (one of which draws on resilience theory) will be discussed in the following section

## **2.4 South African research on gang desistance**

In a South African study by Daniels and Adams (2010) on gang involvement that draws on resilience theory, the three former gang members from a township in Cape Town who were interviewed reported that personal hardships (such as the death of a parent) and pivotal events (such as becoming a father) led them to question and critically reflect on their value system and identity as gang members. This, along with emotional support from significant others as well as a strengthening in religious beliefs, appeared to play a role in their desistance from gang involvement. After having left their gangs the participants replaced their gang identity with a personal identity which encompassed taking personal responsibility for their pasts and committing themselves to more positive futures. As gang members they had to abide by the values and rules of the gang, but as former gang members they had the freedom to focus on themselves and find a purpose in life (Daniels & Adams, 2010). Daniels and Adams (2010) recognise that exiting gangsterism was not a

straightforward process for the participants in that they were constantly confronted with the crime and violence of their past which led to being alienated by their communities. The authors conclude “These individuals know that living the life of the former gangster requires tremendous resilience and ongoing courage to stay focused on their new paths” (Daniels & Adams, 2010, p. 58). It appears that the authors are using resilience in this context to mean an inherent individual trait.

In my review of the literature this is the only study I identified on gangsterism in South Africa that draws on resilience theory. While it demonstrates important findings when it comes to disengaging from gang involvement (including some focus on the challenges faced by former gang members in desisting), it is limited by its small sample size (only three former gang members were interviewed), by the fact that it does not conceptualise resilience as an interactional process involving both the individual and his/her context, and by the fact that it does not make use of gang desistance literature. This may be because the predominant focus of the study was on gang joining; specifically how childhood experiences influence and shape youths’ decisions to become gang members.

Two other South African studies on gangsterism (that do not draw on resilience theory) also explore gang desistance. Wijnberg and Green (2014) conducted a study on gang membership and drugs with twelve current and former gang members in Cape Town. Rodgers and Jensen (2015) explored gang-related violence reduction interventions, which included a section on ethnographic data collected from three former gang members in South Africa. In both studies the importance of making a clear lifestyle change when exiting the gang is highlighted; for example, by becoming religious or entering into a committed romantic relationship (Rodgers & Jensen, 2015; Wijnberg & Green, 2014). Factors that motivated disengagement from the gang for participants in Wijnberg and Green’s (2014) study included fear of safety, prosecution and a prison life sentence, restricted mobility and feelings of disillusionment with the gang. Similar to the study by Daniels and Adams (2010), both these studies do not exclusively focus on gang desistance: Wijnberg and Green (2014) explores gang membership more generally, including a specific focus on the role of drugs, while Rodgers and Jensen (2015) review gang-related violence reduction interventions. Further, Rodgers and Jensen (2015) drew on data from only three participants in their discussion of desistance. Neither of the studies addresses the challenges associated with desistance (such as finding employment in a context of limited employment opportunities and high rates of poverty), nor do they include a focus on identity. This is an important shortcoming to highlight, given the increasing recognition in international literature of the role

identity plays in gang desistance, and the identity related theories that have been advanced in relation to desistance from gang involvement (see for example, Berger et al. (2016), Bubolz and Simi (2015) and Decker et al. (2014)).

Another South African work worth mentioning here is Jonny Steinberg's (2004) book, *The Number*. In it he gives an account of Magadien Wentzel's (a former member of the 28s Numbers gang in prison) journey through the Cape underworld and prison gang system. While it is not a formal study of gang desistance, it offers some important insights that support findings from the above discussed South African studies. In Magadien's story of leaving the 28s Number gang, emotional and practical support from the head of the maximum security prison where Magadien was incarcerated seemed to be pivotal in his reform. So too was embracing religion, which offered him redemption for his past, as well as support from a counsellor working in the prison and focusing on mending his relationships with his family.

These four South African works give us some insight into the desistance process of former gang members (and appear to be in line with the international research), but are limited by their small sample sizes, their non-exclusive focus on gang desistance, their limited attention to the role identity plays in desistance and also how difficulties in the desistance process are overcome by former gang members, particularly in a context of high rates of poverty and unemployment.

## **2.5 Chapter Summary**

The majority of gang desistance research to date – and indeed gang research more generally - has been conducted in high-income countries. There is a lack of research that offers an in-depth exploration of gang desistance in low- and middle-income countries such as South Africa, where socioeconomic conditions are very different to those of high-income nations, and, as a result, gangs, and therefore gang desistance, may take on a different form (Higginson & Benier, 2015). For instance, desistance in high-income settings is often accompanied by accessing a legitimate means of making an income (Berger et al., 2016); this may be less possible in a setting where there are too few jobs available.

The existing empirical research on gang involvement offers some insight into the motives for and methods of desisting from gang involvement, as well as the social and subjective factors that may support this process. However, theoretical frameworks for gang desistance are limited, and while theory relating to desistance from crime can be of use in filling this gap, gang desistance may be conceptually and practically different to crime desistance: Desistance from crime concerns the stopping of a pattern of criminal behaviour or

lifestyle, while desistance from gangs concerns ceasing criminal activities *and* leaving a criminal peer group which, arguably, might make gang desistance more difficult than crime desistance, given the companionship and economic support gang membership appears to offer, the social and emotional ties that may persist even after criminal offending has stopped, and the pressure desisting gang members may experience from their gang peers to stay in the gang (Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Mandel, 2006; O'Brien et al., 2013). Thus, gang desistance may require its own unique theory.

The notion of resilience may be able to make an important contribution here given not only its similarities to desistance conceptually, but also its focus on the challenges and risks associated with the process of desistance, the interaction between the individual and the environment, and its emphasis on how an individual actively navigates towards protective resources in supporting his/her well-being.

Given the prevalence of and problems associated with gangsterism in the Western Cape, it would be of great benefit to have a more comprehensive understanding of the processes involved in gang desistance. Understanding how and why individuals desist from gangs has important implications for policymakers, the criminal justice system, and in the development of effective interventions (Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Chu et al., 2015; MacRae-Krisa, 2011; Pyrooz et al., 2014).

## **2.6 Specific aim and research question**

In light of the above-mentioned gaps in the literature, the overarching aim of this research was to explore gang desistance from the perspective of former gang members. Accordingly, the following research question was addressed: *How do former gang members, through their narratives, understand and make sense of their desistance from gang involvement?*

## CHAPTER THREE: NARRATIVE AND CRITICAL REALISM

This study falls within a narrative theoretical framework and also draws on the theory of critical realism. Below I elucidate these theories and explain their relevance in researching gang desistance.

### 3.1 Narrative theoretical framework

In the sections that follow I provide some background to the narrative theoretical framework, before moving on to how narrative has been defined, how it has been applied to desistance-related studies and its applicability in studying desistance from gang involvement.

In the last few decades there has been increasing interest across the social sciences in the study of narrative (Goodson & Gill, 2011; Murray, 2000); what many have termed the “narrative turn” (Goodson & Gill, 2011, p. 18). The narrative turn emerged in the context of philosophical discussion on the relationships between the individual and wider society, as well as social, political and historical dynamics. It also emerged in the context of questioning and challenging the positivist approach to studying the social world and understanding subjective experiences (Goodson & Gill, 2011). A major critique of positivism is that it does not allow for proper scrutiny of human actions and social interaction, and tends to situate the researcher as completely separate from the social reality of which they are a part (Goodson & Gill, 2011). Thus, “the narrative turn arose at a time of a pressing need for self-reflexive modes of inquiry into social phenomena” (Goodson & Gill, 2011, p. 18). While the narrative approach in social science research has its roots in the broader paradigm of social constructionism, it also draws on phenomenology. Therefore, the focus of a narrative theoretical framework is on both the socio-cultural context as well as individual lived experiences (Hiles & Cermak, 2008).

#### 3.1.1 Defining narrative

There is substantial disagreement on how precisely to define narrative (sometimes used interchangeably with the term story; Riessman, 1993). Definitions in Western literature tend to describe narrative as an account of temporally organised events, with a clear beginning, middle and end (Fraser, 2004; Riessman, 2008). However, not all narratives take on this form; for instance, the narratives of collectivist cultures may be structured in a non-linear and episodic way, while survivors of trauma may share stories that are chaotic and disorganised in form (Crossley, 2000; Huysamen, 2013; Riessman, 2002). The key tenet of all narratives, though, is their focus on contingency – the consequential linking of events

(Riessman, 2008). When people share narratives or stories, they connect particular events perceived by them as important into a sequence (Riessman, 2008).

While a narrative may refer to a topically centred single unit of discourse, on the other end of the spectrum it can also refer to an entire life story. Most narrative research in the social sciences lies in the middle of this continuum, where narrative encompasses an extended account of someone's life that develops over the course of one or multiple research interviews (Riessman, 2008). Key to research that employs a narrative framework is that narratives are preserved and treated analytically as units, rather than fragmented into thematic categories, which is the traditional approach taken in many other qualitative methods of analysis (Riessman, 1993, 2008).

Narratives tell us not only about peoples' past experiences, but also how they understand those experiences, as it is through narratives that people can make sense of their lives and construct their selfhood and identities (Crossley, 2000; Hiles & Cermak, 2008; Murray, 2000; Riessman, 1993). This is of particular importance when it comes to people who have experienced difficult life events, uncertainty or trauma (Parker, 2010; Riessman, 1993). When disruptions occur that break expectations for continuity, it is through story-telling that people make meaning out of events they experience and create a semblance of order (Riessman, 2008). Narratives therefore provide researchers with a way in which to understand how people construct their identity and create and maintain meaning over time (Crossley, 2000; Hauser, Golden, & Allen, 2006; Hiles & Cermak, 2008; Murray, 2000).

Importantly, narratives are not a reflection of an empirical truth. Rather, they are socially constructed by individuals, meaning that there are multiple ways in which experiences can be represented through narratives (Fraser, 2004; Parker, 2010; Riessman, 1993). Representation is key to understanding narratives: researchers do not have direct access to people's subjective experiences; rather, they have access to their *representations* of their experiences. In other words, they have access only to what people choose to share of their past experiences and how they choose to share it (Presser, 2009; Riessman, 1993). This story-telling process needs to be understood in context: people draw on discourses and values from their culture in story-telling. Stories are also composed for particular audiences: different listeners may elicit different stories (Riessman, 1993, 2008). Telling a story is therefore not just about representing a past experience, it is also about creating a representation for how people want to be seen by those listening to the story being told (Riessman, 1993). In this way, people can use narratives to "remember, argue, justify, persuade, engage, entertain, and even mislead an audience" (Riessman, 2008, p. 8). Thus,

narratives are not passive or neutral accounts of events; they can be seen to *do* things (Huysamen, 2013; Riessman, 2002).

### **3.1.2 Narrative and desistance**

The narrative approach has been used in studying both desistance from gang involvement (Moloney et al., 2009; Søgaard et al., 2016) and (more commonly) desistance from crime (Bachman et al., 2016; King, 2013a; Liem & Richardson, 2014; Maruna, 2001; Stevens, 2012; Stone, 2016).

The relevance of using a narrative theoretical framework has not been discussed in great depth in gang desistance studies. However, in their study on gang and crime desistance amongst men in a reformatory programme, Søgaard et al. (2016) note that a key way in which to explore individual agency and meaning-making in the desistance process is to focus on the narratives of former offenders. They further note that they used a narrative approach to “uncover the dynamics between reformatory interventions, agency and the [participants’] constructions of masculinity” (Søgaard et al., 2016, p. 4). Their study findings illustrate that the use of hyper-masculine symbolism (for example, boxing) at the reformatory programme encouraged participants to “engage in narrative re-constructions of identities and to socialize these into new subject positions defined by agency, self-responsibility and behavioural changes” (Søgaard et al., 2016, p. 16). Thus, through the narrative approach the authors were able to explore the participants’ reconstruction of identity, while recognising the role that the reformatory programme played in shaping these reconstructions (thereby rooting the participants’ narratives in a particular context).

While the narrative theoretical approach is not yet well-developed in the gang desistance literature specifically, its importance in studying desistance from crime more generally is commonly recognised. One of the best-known applications of narrative theory to desistance is likely the work of Maruna (2001) who, informed by the writings of McAdams (1988), explored the process of identity reconstruction followed by former criminal offenders who went on to lead fruitful lives. Maruna (2001) argued that people tell stories to account for what they have done and why. Thus, stories offer an explanation for people’s behaviour. Further, stories can also guide people’s *future* behaviour as people act in ways that are in line with the stories they tell about themselves (Maruna, 2001; McAdams, 1988). Maruna (2001) also argued that stories are explicitly contextual: by listening to the stories of members of a particular group (for instance, former criminal offenders) we can understand how criminality is constructed by society at a particular point in time.

Since Maruna's (2001) seminal work on desistance, other empirical qualitative research suggests that individuals who desist from criminal offending construct new, more prosocial identities (for instance, that of a caring father) for themselves through the narratives they tell - identities which do not cohere with their past criminal selves (Liem & Richardson, 2014; Stevens, 2012; Stone, 2016). In his study on narrative and identity change amongst desisting offenders, King (2013a), argued that narratives and the reconstruction of new identities therefore help individuals to "maintain desistance through conditioning of individual's action in the present context" (p. 148). King (2013a) further argued that narratives can shape future social interactions and behaviour, given that individuals will behave in ways that aligns with the stories they tell about themselves. On the other hand, narratives are also shaped by the individual's context which determines the availability of particular identities (and resources) for individuals to take up (King, 2013a; Stone, 2016).

### **3.1.2.1 Using narrative to understand desistance from gang involvement**

A narrative framework is well-suited to exploring gang desistance firstly because narratives are acknowledged as playing a critical role in helping individuals account for past criminal behaviour, and in explaining how they move towards establishing a life that is characterised by prosocial behaviour (King, 2013a; Maruna, 2001); how desisting individuals are able to "make good" (Stevens, 2012, p. 528). Thus, drawing on a narrative framework in this study allows for the examination of how former gang members account for their past gang involvement and how they moved towards a more prosocial lifestyle.

Secondly, in the narrative theoretical framework the perspective of the narrator is privileged, thereby enabling the individual's agency in the process of desistance to emerge (Hauser et al., 2006; Riessman, 1993, 2008). This is important given the growing recognition in desistance research of the role subjective experiences can play in desistance (Søgaard et al., 2016). Relatedly, the focus in the narrative approach is on how individuals construct their identities and create and maintain meaning over time (Crossley, 2000; Hauser et al., 2006; Hiles & Cermak, 2008; Murray, 2000). This is central to desistance research, which draws attention to how individuals reconstruct new identities for themselves as they move from an offender to a non-offender (Liem & Richardson, 2014; Stevens, 2012; Stone, 2016). However, a narrative theoretical framework is also cognisant of the role the individual's context plays in shaping subjective experiences as it recognises that the availability of identities that an individual can take up is largely determined by the individual's context (King, 2013a; Stone, 2016). A narrative theoretical framework is therefore sensitive to both

the individual's subjective experiences, and how these are shaped by his/her context (Hauser et al., 2006). Therefore, the narrative framework allows for exploration into former gang members' subjective experiences of their desistance process, while at the same time rooting these experiences in their particular context.

### **3.2 Critical realism**

Along with the narrative theoretical framework, this research is also guided by the theory of critical realism. The theory of critical realism originated from the work of the philosopher, Roy Bhaskar in the 1970s (Fletcher, 2017). The term is the result of the merging of two concepts key to Bhaskar's writing: transcendental realism and critical naturalism. Transcendental realism refers to the argument Bhaskar uses in his realist conception of science, while critical naturalism, by contrast, deals with the "methodological question of whether or not a genuine natural science of society is possible" (Bhaskar, 1975, 2005[1979]; Harvey, 2002, p. 164).

The philosophical framework of critical realism is a relatively new approach to social science research, but is increasingly recognised "as having a unique potential to effectively frame, identify and understand those complex phenomena that comprise the social science world" (Schiller, 2016, p. 88). It has been used in studies on child welfare (Houston, 2001b), nursing (Schiller, 2016), homelessness (Fitzpatrick, 2005; Kolar, Erickson, & Stewart, 2012), women's health (Ussher, Perz, & May, 2014) and desistance (F.-Dufour & Brassard, 2014; Stubbs, 2014). In the sections that follow I give an account of how critical realism has been conceptualised, how it has been used in the context of desistance, and its application to desistance from gang involvement.

#### **3.2.1 Defining critical realism**

A key challenge in the social sciences is how to develop a theory that takes into account human agency and the role individuals play in defining their experiences, while still acknowledging the impact of social structures on shaping individuals' subjective experiences (Houston, 2001a). Critical realism (along with a narrative theoretical framework) is one theory that can be of great use in addressing this challenge.

Critical realism offers an alternative to positivism and social constructionism, while simultaneously drawing on elements of both theoretical frameworks (Fletcher, 2017). Positivism as a philosophy of science emphasizes that any knowledge claims made about the natural world should be limited to empirical observations (Martinez Dy, Martin, & Marlow,

2014). Bhaskar was critical of this, arguing that it promoted the “epistemic fallacy” (Bhaskar, 2005[1979]), p. 27): what we consider to be reality is limited to what can be objectively known (Fletcher, 2017; Martinez Dy et al., 2014). Social constructionism disputes the view that what we know is based only on an objective truth, and argues instead that social context, culture and history shape knowledge, and that the social world is manufactured through human interaction and language (Gergen, 1985; Houston, 2001a).

Critical realism combines principles of constructionist and realist (or positivist) positions to assert that while social reality is constructed through language, there is an objective and material reality that exists independently of our thoughts and impressions and that constrains our social constructions of reality (Frauley & Pearce, 2007; Houston, 2001a; Oliver, 2012; Sims-Schouten, Riley, & Willig, 2007). According to Bhaskar, this objective reality can be separated into three levels: the empirical level, consisting of events that have been directly or indirectly experienced or perceived by individuals; the actual level, consisting of all events regardless of whether or not they have been experienced or perceived; and the causal level, comprising the causal mechanisms that generate events that appear at the empirical level (Fletcher, 2017; Houston, 2001a, 2001b; Martinez Dy et al., 2014; Oliver, 2012; Schiller, 2016) – what Bhaskar calls “generative mechanisms...the causal powers of ways of acting of structured things” (Bhaskar, 2005[1979]), p. 10 and p. 187). This causal level of reality is of unique and central importance in understanding critical realism (Houston, 2001a, 2001b; Schiller, 2016).

According to critical realism, generative (or causal) mechanisms occur in “open systems” at the causal level of reality (Houston, 2001a, p. 850), which means that the natural world is comprised of a range of heterogeneous systems that each have their own distinct mechanisms operating simultaneously. For example, both innate psychological mechanisms and wider social or economic mechanisms will influence people’s actions (Houston, 2001a, 2001b). Sometimes these mechanisms combine to emphasize a particular effect, while at other times they counterbalance one another. For instance, for some youth experiencing adversity, risk and protective mechanisms may interact in a certain way so as to result in a gang membership, while for others these mechanisms may interact differently, resulting in a prosocial outcome (Houston, 2001a, 2001b; Rutter, 1999; Schiller, 2016; Willig, 1999). Thus, critical realism posits that these mechanisms are not deterministic; rather, they produce “tendencies” (Houston, 2001a, p. 850). Further, the way in which these mechanisms interact is context specific (Schiller, 2016).

Importantly, within this causal level of reality the individual is not at the mercy of these mechanisms; rather, he/she has agency and can actively shape and transform his/her social world (Fitzpatrick, 2005; Fletcher, 2017; Harvey, 2002; Houston, 2001b). However, an individual's agency in actively navigating the social world is limited by the strategies and actions provided by his/her social context (Fitzpatrick, 2005; Harvey, 2002). Thus, critical realism draws attention to the causal mechanisms within individuals, their social network and wider society, while bearing in mind that individuals have the capacity to transform their situations (depending on what is available to them in their social context); their actions can mediate the effect of the causal mechanisms at play (Houston, 2001a).

### **3.2.2 Critical realism and desistance**

In my review of the literature I did not find any gang desistance studies that draw on the theory of critical realism. However, critical realism has been used in crime desistance research (F.-Dufour & Brassard, 2014; Stubbs, 2014). Below, I discuss these crime desistance studies and then develop an argument for why critical realism is an appropriate framework for understanding desistance from gang involvement.

In her study with young men previously involved in the criminal justice system in the United Kingdom, Stubbs (2014) conceptualised crime desistance as resilience to re-offending, drawing on critical realism theory. Stubbs (2014) argued that critical realism is well-suited to studying “complexity” (p. 53) given that from a critical realist perspective, complex issues (such as resilience to re-offending) are not simplified or controlled for but rather embraced. She further argued that critical realism can be used to explore the interplay or reciprocal interaction between internal (individual) and external (environmental) mechanisms that result in a particular outcome (resilience to re-offending). This is in line with resilience and desistance literature which argues that both processes involve an interaction between the personal agency of the individual and his/her specific socio-cultural context (Farrall et al., 2010; Fitzpatrick, 2011; Ungar, 2008). Stubbs (2014) found that individual level mechanisms that supported resilience to re-offending amongst participants included the capacity to cope with or manage difficulties, having determination, being able to self-reflect, and having self-esteem and self-worth. Environmental-level mechanisms that played a role in the participants’ resilience included connecting with friends and intimate partners, and having access to professionals and services. Importantly, these internal and external mechanisms interacted with one another: for example, the participants’ ability to

cope with difficulties was enhanced by the services they were able to access while in prison and when back in their home communities (Stubbs, 2014).

In their study on desistance amongst male Canadian offenders serving conditional sentences, F.-Dufour and Brassard (2014), like Stubbs (2014), note the utility of drawing on critical realism in understanding desistance given its focus on the interaction between individuals (what they call “agents”) and the environment (what they term “social structures”) and how this leads to desistance. F.-Dufour and Brassard (2014) take this argument one step further, noting that agents are born into “pre-existing structures” (p. 314): some individuals (or agents) are in a favourable position with regards to these structures (because they have access to resources in their environment which enable them to thrive), while others start out from unfavourable positions (with limited or no access to resources). However, individuals are not passive in these positions: they are able to choose what path they want their lives to take (but this choice is constrained by what is available to them in their environments; F.-Dufour & Brassard, 2014).

Key to this choice-making process (according to F.-Dufour and Brassard (2014), who draw on Archer’s (2002) morphogenetic approach to structure and agency in this regard, which is rooted in critical realism), is the individual’s personal and social identities. Personal identity refers to how individuals see themselves in the world, and what concerns and values are most important to them. Social identity refers to the different identities individuals take up (for instance, that of a parent, a student or a partner) which reflect their ultimate concerns. These social identities provide individuals with resources that they can draw on to achieve their goals (F.-Dufour & Brassard, 2014). This is in line with some resilience literature which asserts that the formation of positive identities can promote resilience in youngsters facing adversity in that youth can draw on positive identities while exploring and committing to developing identities that provide them with protective resources (Chen et al., 2012; Webb et al., 2017). For example, an adolescent who takes on a religious identity has access to particular beliefs that can provide moral guidance and psychological security (Chen et al., 2012). Drawing on critical realism and the work of Archer (2002), F.-Dufour and Brassard (2014) discuss the process of desistance followed by the participants in their study. They note that finding employment, returning to school or joining a therapy programme helped the participants to “develop or revitalize a range of social identities” (F.-Dufour & Brassard, 2014, p. 331). From these identities they were able abandon their former criminal identities and become law-abiding citizens.

I now turn to a discussion of how critical realism can be used in understanding desistance from gang involvement.

### **3.2.2.1 Using critical realism to understand desistance from gang involvement**

Critical realism is an appropriate theoretical framework to use in studying desistance from gang involvement firstly because critical realism argues that, while social reality is constructed through language, there are also objective and material factors that shape these constructions (Frauley & Pearce, 2007; Houston, 2001a; Oliver, 2012; Sims-Schouten et al., 2007). Thus, using a critical realism lens in studying desistance draws attention to individuals' subjective experiences of gang desistance (how they construct these experiences) while recognising that there are material factors (such as unemployment or access to social support) that may shape an influence the gang desistance process. For instance, an individual's ability to successfully disengage from the gang life may well depend on whether or not he/she is able to find employment or access resources through his/her social network.

Secondly, critical realism recognises the interplay between agency and structure: it is cognisant of the active role individuals can play in transforming their social situations, and thus shaping their desistance (Fitzpatrick, 2005; Fletcher, 2017; Harvey, 2002; Houston, 2001b), while recognising that this capacity is dependent on what is available to them in their environment (F.-Dufour & Brassard, 2014; Fitzpatrick, 2005; Harvey, 2002). Thus, desistance from a critical realist perspective is understood as the interplay between the individual and the environment. This is in line with much of the desistance theory where desistance is increasingly conceptualised as the interplay between human agency and individual choices, and the wider socio-structural context of the individual, including social, societal and institutional factors (Deane et al., 2007; Farrall et al., 2011; King, 2013b).

Lastly, through critical realism attention can also be applied to the role of identity in the gang desistance process – how individuals draw on (social) identities in desisting from gang involvement and how this supports them in their desistance by providing them with access to particular resources (Archer, 2002; F.-Dufour & Brassard, 2014).

### **3.3 A critical realist narrative approach**

In summary, this study is informed by both a critical realist and narrative theoretical approach which recognises the role that agency and identity play in desisting from gang involvement, while also acknowledging that agency and identity are dependent on the

individual's social context - what resources are available to him/her. Using this particular theoretical approach allows for the study of subjective experiences, while recognising that these experiences are shaped by the individual's sociocultural and material context.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH DESIGN, STUDY METHODS AND PROCEDURE**

In the first section of this chapter I explain and give some background to the qualitative research design and its applicability to this study on desistance from gang involvement. In the sections that follow I report on the research methods used and procedures followed in this study, including a description of the study context, the participants and how they were recruited, the data collection and analysis methods and procedures, and finally a discussion on trustworthiness, ethical considerations and reflexivity.

### **4.1 Qualitative research design**

This study falls within a qualitative research design. There is a common perception that qualitative research is a relatively new phenomenon to the psychology discipline, since it emerged in the last 30 to 50 years as a critique to the largely positivist approach of the social sciences (Kelley, 1999; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). Indeed up until the 1960s, the dominant approach to research in psychology (and other social science disciplines) was quantitative research (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). However, while qualitative research has blossomed in recent decades, it has arguably been a part of the psychology discipline from its beginnings (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). Willig and Stainton-Rogers (2008) cite the example of Frederic Bartlett (the originator of cognitive psychology in the 1930s), in this regard, who used informal interviewing methods to explore how the qualities of people's memories changed over time. Further, early key figures in the psychology discipline such as Sigmund Freud and Jean Piaget used introspection and clinical interviews in researching psychological topics like child development, sexuality and personality (Gough & Lyons, 2016; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008).

Scholars like Danziger (1990) note that while psychological research may initially have begun as a subjective (and therefore qualitative) endeavour in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, this was followed by a shift to survey and experimental methods and quantitative research thus became more dominant. This shift may partly reflect the growing socioeconomic demand at the time for psychology to become more relevant, by generating knowledge that could be used for managing society and its problems. A consequence of this was that the more subjectivist methods of enquiry were largely devalued and marginalised, although did not disappear altogether (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008).

In the 1970s, a major critique of psychology's claim of "natural scientific status" (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008, p. 7) emerged. For example, feminist psychologists questioned the quantitative research methods that produced results that purported women to

be intellectually inferior to men (Gilligan, 1982; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). These critiques of the psychology discipline led to the “turn to language” and later the “turn to interpretation” (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008, p. 7; Young, 2016). The turn to language refers to an intellectual orientation which draws attention to the ways in which people talk about reality and how this contributes to its appearance and effects. Because of its concern with meaning, the turn to language led to a proliferation in qualitative research studies (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). Increasingly, qualitative researchers are focusing on questions of interpretation (the turn to interpretation), as opposed to only offering descriptions. Thus, qualitative researchers ask “questions about the social and/or psychological structures and processes which may generate the themes which are identified in participants’ accounts” (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008, p. 8). While the psychology discipline continues to be dominated by quantitative research, the value of qualitative research “is now largely undisputed” (Young, 2016, p. 2).

The qualitative research design is suitable to this study on desistance from gang involvement given its focus on “meaning-making” (Young, 2016, p. 1). In other words, how people make sense of and experience the world, and the meanings they attribute to it (Willig, 2008). The aim of qualitative research, therefore, is to explore the actions, behaviour and decisions of individuals from their perspective (Babbie & Mouton, 2008). This is in line with the aim of this study, which is to explore how former gang members (from their personal perspective) understand and make sense of their gang desistance. Qualitative research also argues that subjective experiences need to be studied within their specific historical, social and cultural contexts (Yardley & Bishop, 2008), again making it a suitable research design for this study given the move in the desistance literature to conceptualising the process of desistance as an interplay between human agency and individual choices, and the wider socio-structural context of the individual, including social, societal and institutional factors (Deane et al., 2007; Farrall et al., 2011; King, 2013b). Thus, with a qualitative research design the individual’s subjective viewpoint is privileged, while acknowledging that this subjectivity is shaped by the individual’s particular context.

## **4.2 Study context**

This study was conducted in a Cape Flats community. In view of the stigma attached to gang involvement and, as a result, the negative light that communities with a high prevalence of gang membership are often painted in, I use a pseudonym for this community,

calling it Suburb A<sup>8</sup>. Suburb A, historically a coloured suburb, was established in 1969 as a result of the Group Areas Act of 1950 which allowed the apartheid government to forcibly move black and coloured citizens into designated areas (Jensen, 1999; Lewis, 2001). In order to gain some background information on Suburb A, I conducted interviews with key community figures, including (for example) policemen, pastors and teachers. I draw on some of these interviews in my description of the community below.

Suburb A, located on the margins of Cape Town, has a population of 45,497 people, comprised of 9375 households with an average household size of 4.85 people, and is a predominantly coloured community (93.7%; City of Cape Town, 2013). In recent years there has been some financial investment into Suburb A. As community figure 6<sup>9</sup> (CF6) noted: “You will see the investment the city [of Cape Town government] has made. If you drive through and you see people working, our roads being upgraded...houses that’s been upgraded”. However, for the most part it is an impoverished area with poor infrastructure and housing (see photos below by Shaun Swingler for a visual depiction of this).



Police officers (in blue, on the left) questioning residents of informal housing in Suburb A.

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<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed discussion on anonymising the data see section 4.8.

<sup>9</sup> In order to protect the identity of these community figures I do not use their real names.



A police officer conducts a body search of a resident of Suburb A. In the background are some of the “courts” - the blocks of flats built by the apartheid government to house coloured people after the forced removals.

Interviews with community figures made it clear that life in Suburb A is difficult for many. For instance, CF1 noted:

**CF1:** It's a struggle for a lot of people...Unemployment, if you drive through the streets you will see immediately. I'm not talking about old people, I'm talking about very young people. You will see a lot of them roaming the streets.

Similarly, CF8 said:

**CF8:** If you drive through the place now, from one o'clock, you'd see lot of them sitting on the corner - young people, which goes back to high unemployment. They don't complete schooling. One of our big challenges is the dropout rate.

Indeed Suburb A has an unemployment rate of 35.33 percent, with only 20.9 percent of the population finishing high school. Further, over 25 percent of the community live on a monthly household income of R1 to R1600 (0.075 to 120 US dollars; City of Cape Town, 2013). In comparison, the unemployment rate across the country is 27.7 percent with 30.9 percent finishing high school (Statistics South Africa 2011, 2017a). Overcrowding in some homes in Suburb A also seems to be problem, with CF7 noting: “I mean, we hear horrific

stories of 37 people sleeping in one house, where the kids sleep at night and the adults sleep during the day”.

Like many other townships created as a result of the forced removals, Suburb A has high rates of alcohol and drug abuse, crime and violence and has been labelled the “capital of gangsterism in the country” (Bosch, 2010, p. 100). As CF1 noted: “Crime, at the end of the day, it’s very much high”. Similarly, CF2 when talking about gang violence, said: “I think on a day-to-day basis this community lives with what we call constant trauma”. News24 described Suburb A as “one of the most volatile gang hot spots in the province” (News24, 2017). It is in the context of Suburb A that this study on gang desistance is situated.

#### **4.3 Participants and recruitment**

Twelve male former gang members were interviewed for this study. Purposive sampling was used as the participants were selected on the basis of pre-determined criteria (Cozby, 2009); namely that they were men from Suburb A who had desisted from a gang, and had not formally identified as a gang member for at least one year. The decision to focus on male former gang members only was based on practical considerations: male participants were significantly easier to come by than female participants.

Given that there are a number of different gangs of varying types operating on the Cape Flats, from larger more powerful gangs, to smaller gangs that establish and die out on a frequent basis, and given that the kinds of resources a desisting gang member can access in their process of desistance will vary according to what is available to him in his community, I decided to limit the sample to one community (Suburb A) in an attempt to ensure that the participants came from the same or similar gangs and that they had access to similar resources. This decision was also informed by practical considerations: the faith-based organisation from which eleven out of the twelve participants were recruited (which I will be calling the Centre in order to ensure anonymity) serves only Suburb A, and there are few such organisations in Cape Town. The twelfth participant was recruited via NICRO, a NPO that specialises in social crime prevention and offender reintegration more generally (NICRO, 2016). NICRO was not able to find any other former gang members (from any community) who met my other inclusion criteria. I also connected with another Cape Town faith-based NPO (the Message Trust) that works with youth at risk (The Message South Africa, 2016). They were able to give me access to three potential participants, but they were not from Suburb A, nor were they from the Cape Flats. I chose to use the Centre and NICRO in recruiting my participants given their focus on crime prevention and rehabilitation. The

Centre runs a gang-related intervention programme (see p. 81 below for more details) and thus had easy access to former gang members. NICRO implements a range of reintegration and rehabilitation programmes for criminal offenders, and thus also has access to former gang members. In addition, both organisations have credibility in the Cape Flats communities which in turn helped to establish my credibility with potential participants. Recruiting participants through these organisations – as opposed to approaching potential former gang members on my own – also helped to ensure my safety. In addition, it gave the participants more agency in that they could choose, before they met me, not to participate in the study. Indeed this was the case with two potential participants who both decided not to participate (see p. 85 below for more detail on this).

All of the twelve final study participants were previously members of prominent street gangs in Suburb A. Five of them were also members of the Numbers gang in prison. Not all of the participants directly discussed the positions they occupied while in their gangs (and this was not a particular focus of the interview schedule). However, those that did discuss it noted that they were drug dealers, “hitmen” and (in a couple of cases) occupied a more senior role in their gangs. However, none of the participants were at the level of the “criminal elite” (Standing, 2003b).

In operationalizing desistance in this thesis, I chose to focus on men who had desisted from gangsterism for at least one year. This decision was based on a discussion I had with the director of the Centre who has many years of experience in working with gang members and agreed that the one year criterion was valid. It was also based on the crime desistance literature (Bachman et al., 2016; Maruna, 2001). For instance in Maruna’s (2001) study with former offenders, he noted “12 months of drug-free, crime-free, and arrest-free behaviour is a significant life change worthy of examination” (p. 48). Further, based on the recidivism literature (Stys & Ruddell, 2013), during the first year of leaving a gang individuals are at a high risk of re-joining the gang. The average length of time that the participants had been out of the gang was 7.9 years, with the shortest duration of former gang member status being one year and four months, and the longest being 23 years (see Appendix B for more detail).

While from a critical realist and narrative perspective it may have been more appropriate to allow the participants to define their own desistance, for pragmatic reasons I enlisted the help of the director of the Centre in recruiting participants. He was requested to choose individuals who had desisted from gangsterism for at least one year, and to ask them if he could provide me with their contact details so that I could explain the study and formally invite them to participate. The twelfth participant was selected by a staff member of NICRO,

who was given the same request. Both the director of the Centre and the staff member at NICRO worked closely with the participants and thus knew how long they had been former gang members. During the interviews, all participants confirmed their former gang member status through the way in which they spoke about no longer identifying as gang members. Self-nomination of gang membership is considered “a particularly robust measure of gang membership capable of distinguishing gang from non-gang youth” (Esbensen, Winfree Jr, He, & Taylor, 2001, p. 124); by extension, self-nomination as having left the gang may be equally valid.

However, I acknowledge that defining and measuring desistance is fraught with difficulties. In the current study, one participant – P12<sup>10</sup> – discussed using his status as an “elder” in his work with the gang-related intervention programme. For instance, he stated that if someone in the community is robbed he “can get [their] stuff back for [them]”. This raised a discussion on whether or not he is still considered an active gang member:

**P12:** In their [the gang’s] minds I’m still a member, but they know I’m not active.

They know I’m out of the gang and whatever. I didn’t join another gang, so by them I’m still a [gang member].

**JK:** And by you?

**P12:** No by me I’m a [*gives name of gang intervention programme*], I’m not a gang member anymore.

Although this was not a topic of conversation in any of the other interviews, it raises an interesting question, and speaks to one of the difficulties in defining desistance: if an individual self-identifies as a former gang member but this status is not recognised by his gang, can he truly be considered a former gangster? According to secondary desistance – the longer term maintenance of non-offending coupled with a change in identity from “offender” to “non-offender” (King, 2013a; Maruna, 2001), this recognition from others is not relevant. However, if one were to follow the definition of tertiary desistance (what Nugent and Schinkel (2016) call relational desistance), social and legal recognition from others of an individual’s desistance is key (Gormally, 2014; McNeill, 2014).

Another difficulty in defining desistance is that while an individual may self-identify as a former gang member, he/she may continue participating in criminal and non-criminal

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<sup>10</sup> In order to protect the identity of the participants, I refer to them as Participants 1 to 12 (or P1 to P12)

activities with his/her gang, and retain social and emotional ties with them (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Furthermore, gang membership is a complex phenomenon in the Western Cape, with some arguing that a gang member can never truly leave the gang, particularly if he belonged to one of the Numbers gangs in prison (Wijnberg & Green, 2014). In light of these difficulties, in this thesis I chose to define desistance as a “gradual process, where an individual has left their gang, but retains a diminishing number and diminished intensity of ties to members of the former gang” (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011, p. 423), with their involvement in crime waning over time (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011).

It is important to note that five of the participants were employed by the Centre, working on a gang-related intervention programme which aims to prevent and mediate the transmission of gang violence, as well as assist youth who want to disengage from the gang life. The intervention (originally developed by Gary Slutkin in Chicago) uses a public health approach that views violence as a disease, and thereby prevents it through interrupting its transmission, changing the norms and behaviour of high risk youth and changing community norms that accept or condone violence (Cure Violence, 2017). The Centre also provides a range of services to Suburb A including counselling programmes, a feeding scheme, substance abuse rehabilitation and career guidance. Two of the study participants (P9 and P10) worked as outreach workers (who work and engage with high risk youth) for the gang-related intervention programme, another two (P4 and P12) were “violence interrupters” (who mediate gang conflict situations in the community), and one (P7) was a public educator (who educates the community about the intervention programme). A sixth participant (P2) worked as a facilitator for the rehabilitation programme of the Centre. As a result of their employment at the Centre, half of the participants interacted with gang members almost on a daily basis as a result of the nature of their work. However, in my interviews with the participants I was given no indication that they were still involved in gang-related activities. Indeed, on the whole, they were all adamant about their non-gang involvement. As P2 noted: “I burnt out all my tattoos, all over myself, with a hot iron and acid, because I’m done with gangsterism now – I’m done with that life”.

The participants were coloured, with an age range of 24 years to 62 years;<sup>11</sup> the average age being 35 years. Nine of the twelve participants had not completed their schooling careers, with two participants never having attended high school. Two participants obtained their National Technical Certificate 4 (equivalent to Grade 12, the final year of high school in

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<sup>11</sup> See Appendix B for more detail on the demographics of the participants

South Africa) while in prison, and one obtained his National Certificate 2 (equivalent to Grade 10). Three participants pursued tertiary education (after having desisted from gang involvement), with one participant studying film and media, another theology, and another social auxiliary work (social auxiliary workers assist and support social services professionals). Six of the participants had full-time employment, four worked part-time, one was a full-time student, and another was unemployed but had completed training as a Seaman in the hope of finding work. Five of the participants were married, five were engaged or in a relationship, and two were single. Seven of the twelve participants had children. It was evident from the participants' stories that religion was central to all of their lives. Nine of the participants identified as Christian and three as Muslim. Although not directly discussed by all the participants, it appeared that praying, going to church or Mosque, and reading from the bible or Quran were activities they engaged in on a regular basis.

Nine of the twelve participants had been addicted to or dependent on drugs in their past. Six of the participants (P1, P2, P3, P5, P6 and P8) were also past participants of the intervention programme offered by the Centre. Two other participants (P9 and P10) participated in the rehabilitation programme the Centre offered before the gang intervention programme started in 2011. Only one participant – P11 – had no affiliation with the Centre, but worked for a local church in Suburb A (see Appendix B for more information on the demographics of the participants).

#### **4.3.1 A note on sample size**

While quantitative research relies on samples that are representative, qualitative research tends to work with relatively small numbers of participants (Willig, 2008). There is much debate concerning what number of participants is considered the right size for qualitative research, with scholars recommending anywhere between five and 50 participants as adequate, depending on the aims of the research study at hand (Dworkin, 2012). Another key consideration to take into account when determining the adequate sample size is the difficulty in recruiting this particular group of participants; namely, male former gang members from Suburb A who have desisted from gang involvement for at least one year. When I first embarked on this research study I spent several weeks connecting with the few Cape Town organisations serving those who had been released from prison or were interested in desisting from crime, as well as leading scholars in gang research, in an attempt to recruit participants that met my specific criteria. I was eventually able to recruit twelve participants through only two organisations: Eleven of the participants were recruited though the Centre

and the twelfth participant was recruited via NICRO. No other organisation was currently serving people who met the inclusion criteria. While there were two more potential participants from the Centre who initially expressed an interest in being interviewed, after several months of attempting to arrange interviews with them, they eventually told me that they did not have the time to participate.

While initially I was concerned that twelve participants may be too low a sample size, upon reviewing other qualitative gang desistance studies, I realised that my sample size was similar, and in some cases higher than, other qualitative studies. For example, Albert (2008) had four participants, Bolden (2012) had fifteen, Daniels and Adams (2010) had three, and Deane et al. (2007) and Goodwill and Ishiyama (2016) both had ten participants. In addition, during my first phase of analysis (transcribing and reading through the interview transcripts) it soon became clear that with the two rounds of interviews conducted with each of the participants I had reached data saturation – “the point at which the data collection process no longer offers any new or relevant data” (Dworkin, 2012, p. 1319). These interviews provided in-depth and detailed narratives that would adequately address the aim of my research: *How do former gang members, through their narratives, understand and make sense of their desistance from gang involvement?*

#### **4.4 Data collection and procedure**

Following on from the narrative theoretical framework used in this study, narrative interviewing was used as the method of data collection. The interviews followed a semi-structured approach focusing on the participants’ life histories, with a particular emphasis on their desistance from gang involvement.

##### **4.4.1 Life history interviews**

Given that gang desistance is often studied using a life-course perspective (Roman et al., 2017) and given that there are a variety of factors within the participants’ lives that may have facilitated their process of gang desistance, it is important to employ a method of data collection that allows for the emergence of these factors within a narrative structure. The life history interview is one such method, given its focus on the life course, which is said to be made up of a series of trajectories and transitions; the word “trajectories” refers to “long-term extended patterns in domains such as work, living arrangements, and relationships” and transitions refer to “points in time marked by abrupt changes within trajectories” (Harris & Parisi, 2007, p. 41) – for instance, desisting from a gang.

#### **4.4.1.1 Life history calendar**

Following the life history approach, this study made use of the life history calendar (LHC). Originally, the LHC was designed for large-scale quantitative studies but has recently been adapted for qualitative research too (Harris & Parisi, 2007; Nelson, 2010). Indeed it has been argued that the tool can “be used in qualitative research to stimulate discussion about past experiences and underlying processes that help explain behaviour, attitudes, and emotions” (Martyn & Belli, 2002, pp. 271-272). Typically the LHC collects data on the timing and sequencing of key events in an individual’s life course, while focusing on the life trajectories (for instance, educational transitions, marriages, births) under study as well as the individual’s interpretations and explanations of these life transitions and major events (Harris & Parisi, 2007; Nelson, 2010).

A key advantage of the LHC method is that it is able to capture the process of disengaging from activities, groups or behaviour, and how this process is interpreted and shaped by the individual and his/her environment (Harris & Parisi, 2007; Nelson, 2010). This makes it a tool well-suited to studying gang desistance, given its focus on both the role of individual agency and social context in facilitating desistance.

Two additional advantages of using the LHC are firstly that it eases event recall, and secondly that it is well-suited to exploring emotion-laden or sensitive topics (Nelson, 2010). This is because the participant is able to steer the interview process and begin with any time or subject domain, thereby delaying the discussion of difficult experiences until rapport has been established between the participant and the interviewer (Nelson, 2010). Relatedly, given that it is likely that some if not all of the participants may have experienced some form of trauma or difficulty in the process of desisting from their gang, it is possible that their memories of certain events might not be clear. Accordingly, they would likely benefit from the use of a visual tool in helping them retrieve certain details of their lives (Yoshihama, Gillespie, Hammock, Belli, & Tolman, 2005).

#### **4.4.2 Procedure of life history interviews**

The former gang members were interviewed twice on an individual basis over a period of approximately six months. The reasoning behind this decision was that interviewing the participants twice would allow for the development of some trust and rapport between myself and the participants, as well as follow up questioning and clarification on any unclear points made in previous interviews. Another way in which I built up rapport with the

participants – particularly given our differing backgrounds – was by using empathic and active listening in my conversations with them (skills which I have garnered through my background in counselling and psychology).

The second round of interviews functioned as follow-up interviews in that I asked the participants for more detail or clarification on points that were made in the first interview that were either unclear or called for a more in-depth response. In addition, participants were given the opportunity to elaborate on their stories, or provide more detail where they thought it was necessary. Interestingly, while the second round of interviews provided more detail on the participants' stories, none of the participants changed their stories between the first and second round. While re-narrativisation is an explicit feature of Riessman's (1993) approach, it did not occur in this study. This may reflect that these men have often rehearsed their narratives, given their involvement in the generative work of helping others.

Once the director of the Centre and my contact at NICRO had found former gang members who were interested in participating in the study, I made telephonic contact with them to give them a brief overview of what the study entailed and what was expected of them in the interviews (see Appendix C). I arranged the first interview times and dates with those who were interested in participating, according to what best suited their work and/or personal schedule.

Each interview was approximately one hour in length, was recorded with the consent of the participants, and took place in a private venue at the Centre, with the exception of one interview, which took place at a quiet venue at a local church. These venues were selected by the Director of the centre. The first round of interviews took place from February to March 2016 and the second round from March to July 2016. With each participant there was a four to six week break between their first and second interviews (with the exception of two participants where the break was several months due to their busy work schedules).

The very first interview in February 2016 served as a pilot interview. This interview was reviewed by myself and my supervisor in order to ascertain whether appropriate information was gathered. After listening to the recording of the interview, I noted that I had been trying (at times) to get a coherent life story from Participant 1, sometimes steering him back on topic when I thought he was deviating from the question that had been asked. I realised that this kind of questioning may have inhibited him. Thus, in interviews after this one I was careful to let the participants tell their stories in whatever way they chose, asking questions only when the participant was not forthcoming or I needed clarification or detail.

Before the first interview began the participants were given a consent form. I ran through this form (see Appendix D for the consent form and Appendix E for the full interview schedule), explaining what the study entailed, and gave the participants an opportunity to read through the form and raise any questions they had. During the first interview the participants were asked to explore their life histories focusing on the transitions and trajectories they saw as being important in their lives. I marked these down on the life history calendar as the participant spoke. The second round of interviews was a continuation of the first round and focused on any points made in the first interview that were not clear or that required more detail. It was also an opportunity for the participants to share any other details of their lives they may have forgotten to mention, or did not feel comfortable mentioning, in the first interview. Indeed in several interviews new information emerged that the participants had not discussed in their first interviews.

The participants were given a small compensation for their participation in the interviews - a R20 (roughly 1.5 US dollars) grocery store gift voucher per interview, giving a total of R40. I ended each second interview with the participants by thanking them for their time and informing them that they could contact me should they require any follow up. None of the participants made contact with me after the second round of interviews. However, I did present a summary of my findings at the Centre which was attended by (among other people) seven out of the twelve participants I interviewed (see section 4.5.2 below for more detail).

In both interviews open-ended questions were used as these are likely to encourage narratives. For example “Tell me what happened” is more likely to elicit an extended account than “When did X happen?” (Riessman, 1993, p. 54). In addition, probe questions were included where the participants had any difficulty relaying their stories or in keeping their stories going (Riessman, 1993). At the end of each interview I noted down my impressions of the interview; for instance, how the participant behaved, whether any stories stood out for me, and whether there were any points that I would like clarified at the following interview. The data from the two rounds of interviews were transcribed verbatim by me, after which the recordings were erased. The transcriptions were rendered anonymous by the use of pseudonyms for the participants, their gangs, the study community and any people they referred to.

## 4.5 Data analysis

The interview data was analysed using thematic narrative analysis. Below I give a description of this method of analysis and outline the procedure I followed in analysing my data.

### 4.5.1 Thematic narrative analysis

Within the narrative analysis method Riessman (2008) identifies three possible approaches: structural analysis, dialogical analysis and thematic analysis. With structural analysis the focus is on how a narrative is put together – how the narrator uses form and language to achieve particular effects. Dialogic analysis draws attention to how narratives are interactively (dialogically) produced and performed. Thematic analysis is exclusively interested in the content of the narrative, thus focusing on “what” is being said as opposed to “how” it is being said, “to whom” and “for what purposes” (Riessman, 2008).

While I recognise that narratives are not neutral accounts of events – they can be used to “remember, argue, justify, persuade, engage, entertain, and even mislead an audience” (Riessman, 2008, p. 8) - I chose not to focus on this performative aspect of narrative analysis, given my interest in studying the subjective experiences of former gang members; how they understood and made sense of their gang desistance through narratives. However, I also recognise that narratives do not occur in isolation: they are shaped by the interactional context of the interview (where the interviewer plays a key role in influencing what narratives are shared), and are also embedded in a particular social context which includes broader societal discourses as well as social structures (for example, power relations and inequalities) and material conditions (for instance, income and access to social services; Fraser, 2004; Riessman, 1993, 2008). Therefore, while in my analysis the participants’ subjective experiences are the main focus, I also draw attention (where applicable) to the context within which their narratives need to be understood, including the material and discursive contexts (Ussher et al., 2014). This is in line with the critical realist narrative theoretical approach I use in this study, which recognises individuals’ subjective experiences of gang desistance (how they construct these experiences) while acknowledging that there are material factors (such as unemployment or access to social support) that may shape and influence the gang desistance process.

With all approaches to narrative analysis (including thematic narrative analysis) the stories shared by the participants are the object of investigation. Traditional qualitative approaches to analysis tend to fracture these texts, but in narrative analysis they are preserved and treated as units, thus allowing the participants’ agency and ways of constructing meaning

to emerge (Riessman, 1993, 2008). A challenge in narrative analysis is determining what exactly constitutes a narrative in long sections of talk (Fraser, 2004). While sometimes the speaker makes it clear that a story is coming through the use of entrance and exit talk (Fraser, 2004; Riessman, 1993) - for example, “let me tell you about this one time” and “that was how it ended” - there are other times where the analyst needs to look more closely at the text to determine where one story ends and another begins (Fraser, 2004). In the following section I explain how I went about identifying narratives in my interview data and the analytic procedure I followed more generally.

#### **4.5.2 Analysis procedure**

Riessman (1993, p. 60) argues that “analysis cannot be easily distinguished from transcription”. Listening to the recording closely and repeatedly as well as transcribing in a methodical fashion can lead to insights that shape how a researcher chooses to represent a narrative in the final text , and therefore is a helpful first step in analysis (Riessman, 1993). In transcribing my interviews I began by listening to each recording all the way through, making notes of anything that stood out for me. Thereafter I transcribed each interview into Microsoft Word, using the Express Scribe transcription software. Each transcription was transcribed verbatim in the original language used by the participants (which was for the most part English, with some use of Afrikaans and colloquial Afrikaans terms – English translations are provided in the findings chapter), including all utterances (for instance “uh” or “um”), emotional inflections (for example, laughter) and pauses. While I did not include these in the final narrative excerpts of the study, I chose to include them when first transcribing in order to gain a better understanding of the feel and tone of the participants’ stories, as this assisted me in my initial interpretations of the data.

Once I had finished transcribing the interview data I read through each transcription several times (Hiles & Cermak, 2008), making notes and queries in the margins. This allowed me to familiarise myself with the depth and breadth of the data, and highlight possible meanings and patterns. It is important to note that I did not directly analyse the data from the life history calendars. Rather, these calendars were used to assist the participant in constructing their life story during data collection. I did, however, draw on the calendars while making notes on the transcriptions. Thereafter I went about identifying stories within each transcript which I did on a case-by-case basis (Fraser, 2004). With thematic narrative analysis the analyst theorises from within each case, as opposed to from themes or categories across cases (Riessman, 2008). Sometimes the participants’ stories were easy to identify

through their use of entrance and exit talk. Where this was not the case, I focused on specific ideas expressed by the participants and/or scenes the participants described in which a plot unfolded (Fraser, 2004). Doing this helped me to determine the boundaries of the participants' stories. Identified stories were highlighted in Microsoft Word.

After identifying the participants' stories I coded them using the Nvivo software, providing a label or description for each code (see Appendix F for a visual example of this). Again this was done on a case-by-case basis and also inductively (as opposed to deductively) in that the codes were generated from the data itself (Joffe & Yardley, 2004). After coding each of the participants' stories I organised these codes into possible themes, keeping the participants' stories intact. It was at this stage that I compared the codes across each of the participants' transcripts, looking for patterns and commonalities (Fraser, 2004). In determining how codes (stories) could be grouped together thematically, I used mind-mapping and listing, testing out codes in different "theme-piles" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 20). In deciding on the final themes to include in my analysis I was guided by the overarching aim of my study: to explore how former gang members understand and make sense of their gang desistance.

After the participants' stories were organised into themes I began writing about each theme - what the participants were saying and what this might mean. I shared my writing with my supervisor and met with her on a regular basis where she gave suggestions and offered insights. I also shared my writing with friends and family members who gave their input on my initial interpretations.

In my first draft of analysis I wrote only about my interview data, including extracts that I felt best illustrated the themes identified. In my second draft I drew on other literature and theory, noting where my study findings were the same, and where they differed to other gang (and crime) desistance studies. Once a full draft of my analysis was completed I had an opportunity to present a summary of my findings at the Centre, which was attended by (among other people) seven out of the twelve participants I interviewed. The participants were given the opportunity to give informal feedback during and after this presentation, and indicated their agreement with how I had interpreted their stories.

In my analysis I tried as far as possible to include the participants' stories as a whole (at times summarising parts of their stories in my own words), while recognising that in the final text I include a *representation* of the participants' stories. As Riessman (1993) notes "An investigator sits with pages of tape recorded stories, snips away at the flow of talk to make it fit between the covers of a book" (p. 13).

#### 4.6 Trustworthiness

The traditional ideas of reliability and validity used in evaluating quantitative research cannot be applied to the qualitative design given that they stand in opposition to one of the central tenets of qualitative research: that truth is not fixed and objective, but rather fluid and multiple (Davies & Dodd, 2002; Van Niekerk, 2015). Thus, there is growing recognition of the need for developing standards or criteria by which to evaluate qualitative research, particularly in view of the plurality of qualitative research methods that have emerged in psychology over the years (Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow, & Ponterotto, 2017; Young, 2016). The term trustworthiness has been used across qualitative research paradigms to indicate the “evaluation of the worthiness of research and whether the claims made are warranted” (Levitt et al., 2017, p. 9). Below I discuss how I ensured the trustworthiness of my research study.

Giving “thick descriptions of one’s approach to the research” (Young, 2016, p. 7) is key to establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research, particularly because these descriptions allow for one’s research study to be replicated in other contexts (Davies & Dodd, 2002; Young, 2016). Giving a description of how interpretations were produced and making clear exactly what was done, helps others ascertain the trustworthiness of the research (Riessman, 1993). Thus, as is seen in the above sections, I provide a detailed account of the methods used and procedures followed in this study. In particular, I give a clear explanation of my analysis procedure and how I arrived at my interpretations of the data.

Further, in order to ensure the credibility of my research, I discussed my initial interpretations of the data with friends, family members and my supervisor as a way of checking the findings that were emerging. Holding two interviews with the participants also helped with credibility as it allowed for a degree of member checks (checking emerging findings with participants (Clissett, 2008)): the second interview afforded me the opportunity to clarify points made in the first interview. I also spent some time at the Centre, engaging in conversations with the director and other staff members, in order to better understand the context within which my findings need to be understood. Further, I presented my final results at the Centre, where most of the participants I interviewed were given an opportunity to comment.

Another key aspect of trustworthiness in qualitative research is ethics, given that ethical considerations can impact the way in which questions are asked and how the data is reflected on. Relatedly, good ethical practice involves acknowledging the subjectivity of the

researcher in the research process (Davies & Dodd, 2002; Van Niekerk, 2015). Thus, the following two sections focus on ethical considerations and reflexivity.

#### **4.7 Ethical considerations**

This study was granted ethical approval by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Cape Town (See Appendix A for the letter of ethical clearance).

As Brinkmann and Kvæle (2008) note “when we observe and talk to people, analyse what they say and do, and publish our interpretations to the larger public, we are engaged in a process with inescapable ethical aspects” (p. 263). In qualitative (and quantitative) research, researchers must abide by the ethical principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality and beneficence (the benefits must outweigh the risks; Willig, 2008).

Informed consent involves explaining to the participants the overarching purpose of the research study, the main characteristics of the design (including confidentiality) and any risks and benefits they may incur. It also involves obtaining consent for voluntary participation from the participants, and telling them of their right to withdraw from the study at any time (Brinkmann & Kvæle, 2008). Before each interview began I read the consent form aloud to the participants as well as gave them an opportunity to read through the forms independently and raise any questions they may have had (see Appendix E). They were made aware that the interviews would be tape recorded (with their consent), that any information generated from the interviews would remain confidential, that their names would be kept separate from the interview information, and that when it was transcribed and reported on, pseudonyms for them and their community and any friends, family members or loved ones they refer to would be used in order to ensure complete anonymity.

While I acknowledge that anonymity can serve to deny participants “the very voice in research that might originally have been claimed as its aim” (Parker, 2010, p. 17), I nevertheless chose to anonymise the interview data given the stigma that is often attached to gang involvement and, as a result, the negative light that communities with a high prevalence of membership are often painted in. Further, I felt it was particularly important to protect the identity of the former gang members I interviewed given that they may reveal incriminating information in their interviews (Lambrechts, 2014). Relatedly, the former gang members were also made aware that if they reported on past or future involvement in criminal activities, they should not disclose any specific details (for instance, the place and time), so that the potential usefulness of my notes to agencies such as the police was limited.

I also explained to the participants that their participation was voluntary, that they were allowed to stop the interview and turn off the tape recorder at any point, and that they could withdraw from the interview without enduring any negative consequences (including receiving further services or employment from the Centre or NICRO).

In terms of risks in participating in this research study, I was aware of the possibility that the participants may discuss things that evoked feelings of anger, sadness or anxiety as they may delve into potentially sensitive areas. In prolonged and repeated qualitative interviews on personal topics it is possible that the interview can lead to a quasi-therapeutic relationship (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2008). In one of the interviews a participant was discussing his relapse into drug use and started crying. I asked if he wanted to take a break from or stop the interview to which he responded that he did not. He seemed to compose himself quite quickly and the interview proceeded. He (and all the other participants) were also made aware of the counselling services offered at the Centre. With this particular participant, I also made the director of the Centre aware of his drug relapse (at the participant's request) in order for them to assist him.

In terms of benefits, it is possible that being asked to tell their stories may have felt therapeutic for the participants. For instance, P7 said:

**P7:** At the end of the day I open myself, you know because the end of the day I feel like now I feel, oh my word, I was like way back in my life now. And for me that is something good just to realise, ok, where I were, where I'm at now, and what did I accomplish.

With regards to broader benefits, the information gathered from this study could be used to inform the programmes run by the Centre and could be of use more generally in encouraging other gang members to leave gangs. The findings of the study were shared with the Centre at a presentation held in November 2017. After my thesis has been examined, I will also provide the Centre with an executive summary of the study, highlighting findings that may be of use to them with regards to the gang intervention services they offer.

In order to thank the participants for their participation they were each given grocery store vouchers. I recognise that paying participants for taking part in research studies may influence their decision to participate and affect the interview process, and thus monetary rewards for participation need to be given careful consideration. On the advice of the director of the Centre, I decided to give the participants a R20 (roughly 1.5 US dollars) grocery store

gift per interview (giving a total of R40 per participant). I felt that this was an appropriate amount: it was not too high that it would make the participants feel as though they were obligated to participate, but not too low that it could be used towards buying food or other goods for their family.

Having discussed the ethical considerations of this study, I now turn to a discussion on reflexivity.

#### **4.8 Reflexivity**

While in a qualitative research the perspective of the participants is privileged, the researcher cannot ignore his/her own knowledge and perceptions in conducting research (Babbie & Mouton, 2008; Joffe & Yardley, 2004). Therefore, in qualitative research the researcher is not seen as detached from the research process, but rather is considered an integral part in that his/her values, beliefs and identities are understood to play a role in both the kind of research that is conducted, and the results that are found. The researcher's subjectivity in shaping the construction of knowledge and meaning should therefore be noted throughout the research process (Huysamen, 2013; Willig, 2008).

There is a danger that reflexivity can be employed as a "tick box" exercise (Young, 2016, p. 5) where researchers simply list their personal affiliations (gender, race, ethnicity) without reflecting on the *meaning* of these affiliations to their work (Young, 2016). Thus, in this section I attempt to reflect in detail how my subjectivity has shaped the research process.

The researcher can influence the research process both as a theorist (epistemological reflexivity) and as a person (personal reflexivity; Willig, 2008). With epistemological reflexivity the researcher reflects on how his/her assumptions may have shaped the research process (Willig, 2008). What I anticipated finding in this research and the subjective position from which I made sense of it ultimately affected my final findings (Parker, 2010). For instance, my view that gang involvement is a critical problem in the Cape Flats in need of intervention, as well as my desire for this research study to make a worthwhile contribution in this regard, would have shaped the types of questions I asked the participants, and how I chose to analyse my data. Going in to this research study I worked within the assumption that while gang involvement can benefit and help youngsters (by, for example providing a sense of belonging, a source of income), for the most part the negative side outweighs the positive. This assumption was challenged during my data collection when I was talking to P10 about the Numbers gang. He noted that he remained in the Numbers gang while in prison while simultaneously engaging in the rehabilitation programmes on offer in the prison:

**JK:** And what was that like for you, wanting to make a positive change but still...?

**P10:** The Number gang is actually...it can be a positive thing because if you use it positively you can be, it can have a great effect also on personal life...Because it got good points also in it, how to discipline also, and to learn discipline. But you can use it on a negative way also...Ja [yes], I did partly on a positive way for myself and even to help others.

My use of the phrase “positive change” implied that I saw being in the gang as a negative. P10 picked up on this and proceeded to explain the positive side of the gang to me, thereby making me aware of the assumption I had made. This interaction with P10 made me realise the complexity of gangsterism and, perhaps more importantly for the purposes of this study, that desisting from gang involvement may not always be a positive and straightforward process. Indeed scholars like Nugent and Schinkel (2016) highlight the “pains of desistance” (p. 569) including, for example, social isolation and difficulty in finding legitimate employment (Cooper & Ward, 2012; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016; Søgaard et al., 2016).

With regards to personal reflexivity, it is applicable here to acknowledge my position within an academic institution (the University of Cape Town, UCT). This position affected how I interacted with the study participants and how they interacted with me (Parker, 2010). Coming from UCT I have an academic background in psychology and psychological research. This influenced how I talked and related to them. For example, having basic skills in empathic and active listening (garnered through my psychology training) meant that in my interviews with the participants I was able (to a large extent) to gain a sense of trust and rapport which resulted in the participants opening up to me and sharing their life stories.

At the same time, the participants likely saw me in a particular light as a psychological researcher which may have influenced their story-telling process. Indeed some participants appeared to demonstrate their awareness of - and in some cases express an interest in - my academic background. For example, at the end of P8’s interview I asked if he had any questions for me (which I did for all the participants). He responded:

**P8:** Like, you’re studying psychology, né [slang in Afrikaans for “not so?”]?

**JK:** Mhmm.

**P8:** Ok, see like your job is now to get inside of the, I would say, in Afrikaans is dit ‘n kop dokter, verstaan [*it is a head doctor, understand*]?

**JK:** Mmm.

**P8:** So your job is to get into a person's head.

P8 was particularly open with me in his interviews, giving me an extended and detailed account of his life history, and even including (with little prompting from my side) his own interpretation of why his life took the path it did. It is possible that his openness and frankness with me was, to some extent, facilitated by his awareness that as a psychological researcher I wanted to "get inside his head", or that it somehow gave him permission to be very open.

It is important here to acknowledge the power dynamics that may have been at play in the interview context. While a central aspect of reflexivity is to reflect on the way in which the researcher influenced the research process, reflexivity can also move beyond the subjective opinion of the researcher and explore issues of power relations experienced during the research process (Parker, 2010; Van Niekerk, 2015). As a psychological researcher, it can be argued that I occupy a particular position of power or authority with regards to being an educated professional. The majority of the participants, on the other hand, had limited education and formal training. Thus, in the interview context we were on "unequal footing" in this regard. In this interview P8 alluded to this, saying: "So if I were to look at you, I would say, truly now, this is someone of value ... A student at UCT, all these kinds of things". This power imbalance may have shaped our interactions in that the participants may have felt obliged to respond to my questions in a particular way. In the case of P8, it could be that his openness with me was not only informed by his knowledge of my academic background as a psychological researcher, but also by a desire to impress me, given my position of authority as an educated professional.

This is not to say that I held all the "power" in the interview context. Indeed there were a few times where I felt as though the participants may have had the "upper hand", so to speak. For example, when P11 was discussing his time in prison he said: "When I was in prison, a white lady looking like you, she came to visit me ... and I don't like white people at that time". Although I cannot be certain, it is possible that P11's comparison of me to the woman who visited him in prison and his statement that he "[didn't] like white people at that time" was said with some intention of provoking or upsetting me and perhaps a way of asserting control or authority in the interview situation.

P11's statement above highlights the importance of acknowledging that I am from a different race and class group as well as a different gender to my participants. These

differences could have influenced how the participants saw me, how they related to me, what stories they decided to share and how they chose to share them. As a woman, the participants may have felt a need to censor themselves around me. P1 noted that he does not want people to “talk shit about [him]”. Immediately after saying this he said: “Sorry for the word now”. His apology for swearing made me wonder whether he felt he needed to be polite in his responses to my questions, which may have meant leaving out certain details that he felt I (as a woman) should not hear. At the same time, however, the participants may have felt more able to open up to me precisely because I am a woman and given the normative assumption that women are empathic and sensitive. Indeed for the most part the participants (as noted above) were very open with me in sharing their life stories. The fact that they were able to speak to me in their local patois (which I am familiar with and for the most part understand) may have also facilitated this openness.

Being from a different race and socioeconomic group to the participants may have also shaped the participants’ story-telling. P10, who became involved in a gang in the 1970s (during the apartheid era) noted: “Because as the politics, we got involved with gangs, because like fighting you people, mos<sup>12</sup>. But ja [yes], fighting the whites we formed gangs”. Although P10 does not directly talk about coloured people, his use of the word “we” in comparison to “you people” and “whites” suggests that he is referring to coloured (and black) people as a group of which he is part. Although I personally was in no way involved in apartheid, I belong to the race group that systematically oppressed black and coloured people during the apartheid regime, thus illustrating another potential power dynamic at play in the interview context. While apartheid was dismantled in 1994, for many black and coloured South Africans life has not changed substantially and inequality still exists across racial categories in terms of employment, housing and access to adequate health care and education (Barbarin & Richter, 2013). It is important to acknowledge this because it may have influenced how the participants saw me and thus how they interacted with me. An interaction I had with Participant 3 made me particularly aware of how the participants may have viewed me. At the start of our second interview I asked P3 “if you could just tell me how things are going for you, what’s new since we last met?” P3 responded:

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<sup>12</sup> “Mos” is Afrikaans slang which roughly translates into “obviously” in English. In the context in which P10 uses the word here, however, it cannot be directly translated.

**P3:** Ok, since I met you, I can see you are a very gifted person, a happy person, I can see, I actually don't know you, but I can see that you can give man, I can see you have an open heart man

**JK:** Thank you.

**P3:** And I look forward now man to make a better change now to read music and for the community to help the community, from the guys, the small kids, on school, because I don't want to be ... the gangsterism is not benefit anymore, because I now just look forward in my life now. And I can, if I get a, then I read the music, I can teach it [to] children, but I must read music. And I look forward now in my family, not going back to gangsterism and just look forward man for better things. And looking for now, at the moment I'm unemployed now at the moment looking for a job. If you can, anyone, anyone can sponsor me for go to college maybe, I would appreciate it man.

As is clear from the above, P3 had a strong desire to study music so that he could teach music to youth in his community. Although not said directly, it is probable that P3 viewed me as a resource in helping him to achieve his goal, given my white and middle class background. This is likely to have influenced P3's storytelling: he may have felt compelled to convince me of his reformed lifestyle (which seems to be the case in his story above) so that I helped him to pursue his goal of studying music. This is not to say that his change from a gangster to a non-gangster was not real, but that perhaps he exaggerated it at times in order to impress me in the hope that I would assist him<sup>13</sup>.

In summary, my subjective position (including my assumptions, my academic background, and my gender, race and class) played a key role in shaping the research process.

#### 4.9 Chapter summary

In this chapter I have outlined the research methods used and procedures followed for this study, and the rationale behind choosing a qualitative research design. I have given a detailed explanation of the data collection and analysis strategy and offered an evaluation of this research with regards to trustworthiness, ethics and reflexivity. In the next two chapters I present the analysis and discussion of data. Chapter Five focuses on the participants' stories

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<sup>13</sup> I connected P3 with a music school in a suburb close to where he lives that offers music lessons that are more affordable than most private institutions.

of identity transformation while Chapter Six looks at their stories of leaving the gang and maintaining a reformed lifestyle after having left the gang.

## CHAPTER FIVE: IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION

### **5.1 Introduction**

In this and the next chapter I draw predominantly on the participants' stories of desisting from gang life. To put these journeys towards desistance into context, focus has also been placed on their stories of joining and participating in a gang. In addition, nine out of the twelve participants were also addicted to or dependent on drugs in the past, and so their stories of leaving the gang are sometimes integrally associated with stopping the use of drugs. As such, these stories of drug recovery are also drawn on where applicable.

Through their stories, I trace the pathway of desistance followed by the participants. In my understanding of desistance I draw on the work of Shadd Maruna who proposed that desistance from crime should be defined as a process of maintaining a crime-free lifestyle in spite of the obstacles and challenges that life presents (Maruna, 2001). In the case of gangsterism, then, I argue that desistance should be understood as an ongoing process: not just the leaving of the gang, but also the maintaining of a prosocial lifestyle *after* disengagement, that does not involve gang-related activities.

Following on from the critical realist and narrative theoretical frameworks used in this thesis, I also conceptualise desistance as involving an identity transformation, drawing on the work of theorists like Giordano et al. (2002), Paternoster et al. (2016), Paternoster and Bushway (2009), Berger et al. (2016), Decker et al. (2014) and Bubolz and Simi (2015). At the same time – in line with a critical realist narrative approach – I recognise that this identity transformation is dependent on the individual's social context; what resources are available to him/her, and that desistance is thus best understood as an interplay between the individual and the environment. Therefore, in this and the next chapter I consider the participants' subjective experiences of gang desistance, while simultaneously highlighting the sociocultural and material contexts that shape these experiences.

In order to contextualise the data presented in this chapter and the next one, in the following table I provide an overview of each of the participants' stories. While I try to represent their lives as accurately as possible, it is important to note that what I offer is my *interpretation* of what they shared with me during their interviews - What I have written reflects how I made sense of their stories.

**Table 1: Overview of participants' stories**

<b>Participant 1</b>
Born in 1991, P1 - the youngest participant - grew up exposed to gangsterism through his two older brothers who were involved in gangs. While he was spoilt by his parents, encouraged to go to school and attended Madrasa <sup>14</sup> regularly, his father was also abusive towards him and he experienced conflict – which sometimes became violent - with his older brothers. At the age of 12 he joined a gang which later merged with another gang. Although he had reservations, he “took a tattoo” <sup>15</sup> with this gang at 16 years of age. While at school he began getting into fights as well as selling and using drugs. He stopped attending school at 17 as it was unsafe for him to walk to and from school given his gang involvement. He also lived on the streets and with his gang for several years. While he enjoyed the benefits of being in the gang – having access to drugs, money, friends and parties – he was not fully committed to taking the gang activities seriously. At 22 he was arrested and put in prison for three months. His gang brothers did not bail him out which led him to want to take revenge on them, while also prompting him to reflect on whether being in the gang was what he wanted for his life.
Soon after this he found out his girlfriend was pregnant. At first they broke off the relationship, but later reconciled and got married. After finding out about the pregnancy he went to his mother’s home and used drugs in front of her. She asked if he would like help with his drug addiction and he responded that he did. She took him to the Centre where he enrolled in their rehabilitation programme. He feared that his gang would become violent because of his decision to leave but they did not. While at the programme he did the life skills and carpentry training programmes offered as part of the rehabilitation programme, and afterwards found employment which ended after a short period of time. He began using drugs again and his wife told him to leave their home and go live with his mother. He stopped using drugs, completed a Seaman’s course and moved back in with his wife. He is currently looking for employment.
<b>Participant 2</b>
P2 was born in 1989 and adopted when he was three days old. His adoptive parents loved him and raised him well, but his mother was very strict with him. He grew up in the study community; going to church with his family and doing well in school, although he said that he cannot remember anything about primary school. When he started high school he felt a need to prove himself and fit in, and began socialising with a different group of friends. He smoked and sold cigarettes and then moved onto using drugs. His mother put him in a different school that was closer to home in order for her to keep a closer eye on him. He reached matric but was suspended three times and did not pass the year. His girlfriend fell pregnant and he helped to take care of their son while she finished school. However, they then broke off the relationship as a result of his drug abuse and P2 went on to join a gang.
While in the gang, he sold and smuggled drugs, robbed people, and fought in gang wars. The benefit of the gang for him was that he had access to drugs and was able to associate with “cool people”. As a result of his gang activities and drug use, his family kicked him out. However, he

<sup>14</sup> Madrasa, in this context, refers to a religious school for the study of the Islamic religion.

<sup>15</sup> Taking a tattoo signifies becoming a member of the gang.

still communicated with his mother who asked him on several occasions if he wanted to change his life. At one point she threatened to take his son away from him if he did not change. He admitted to her that he did want to change, but not at that particular time.

At 25 he was caught by the police with a magazine of bullets in his possession. He was arrested and beaten up very badly by the police. The experience led him to reflect on what path his life might take if he continued being a gang member, and he decided to exit gangsterism and stop using drugs. His desire to be a positive role model for his son was also a motivating factor in this decision. He told his family of his decision and went to the Centre where he asked one of the outreach workers to put him in their rehabilitation programme. He completed the programme, converted to Christianity, and burnt out his tattoos with acid and an iron. He got engaged to a woman who is also a recovered drug addict and became a leader at the rehabilitation centre where he works with other former gang members and drug addicts. He feels well-placed to encourage them given what he has gone through. He is actively involved in his son's life, and cited his desire to be a role model for him as motivating him to change his life.

### **Participant 3**

P3 was born in 1992. His father was a member of a gang (before he was born) and was also abusive towards P3 growing up. In Grade 8, through the influence of a female friend, he began using drugs and sold cigarettes to support his drug use. In Grade 9 he decided he did not want to attend school anymore and started associating with a gang. At roughly 15 years he was physically forced into taking a tattoo of this gang – they tied him down while he was on drugs and gave him the tattoo. At some point a conflict emerged between P3's gang and another gang which resulted in this other gang taking over. P3 became a hit man for these new gang and also began robbing people for them. In addition, they stored guns in his home. In 2006 his father took an interdict out against him for his aggressive behaviour in their home. He was also shot - non-fatally – by a rival gang.

P3 began to feel as though he was being used by his gang for their own benefit (for instance, storing weapons in his home). He decided to leave the gang life and went to the Centre to ask for help. They sent him to the rehabilitation centre where he completed the programme. While there he did not take the programme seriously and joked around a lot of the time. He also found out that two of his close friends had been killed while he was away. When he returned home he relapsed into using drugs and then went back to complete the programme for a second time. P3 plays the trumpet and saxophone and goes to the mosque regularly. He has a desire to learn music formally and to teach it in his community. His younger brother uses drugs and P3 kicked him out of their home so that he does not have to be around him when he uses drugs. He is looking for full-time employment.

### **Participant 4**

P4 was born in 1971 and raised by his mother. He did not have much contact with his father. Growing up, his stepfather became abusive towards him when he drank, but P4 nevertheless respected him because he provided financially for the family. Two of P4's older brothers were involved in a gang, and one of his brothers was killed as a result of gang violence in 1988. At the age of 13 P4 became involved with the Backstreet gang, and at 16 he "took a tattoo" with a gang, in order to protect his area from rival gangs. He left school in Grade 7. As a gang member he was involved in several long-term gang wars, and was stabbed once and shot four times. He spent some time in prison (one six-month sentence and one two-year sentence), and used

Mandrax<sup>16</sup> and drank intermittently while in the gang. In 1991, while still in the gang, his girlfriend at the time gave birth to twin boys.

In 1997 P4 met a woman who later became his wife. He embarked on a religious path, converting to Islam. In 1999 he married and in 2000 his daughter was born. He and his wife had four more children after that. He had always felt that when he married he would leave the gang life, which is what he ended up doing. For eight years he worked on the docks in Cape Town's harbour (Cape Town is a major international sea port), after which he became a violence interrupter for the gang intervention programme where he currently works.

#### **Participant 5**

P5 was born in 1988. He grew up living predominantly in informal settlements, with a father who was an alcoholic and ex-gangster, and was abusive towards him and his older brothers. His brothers, whom he admired and looked up to as a youngster, were involved in a gang and in 1999 they were both killed as a result of gang violence. Soon after, at the age of 12, he joined a gang and started selling drugs. He became obsessed with the idea of earning money. At 16 he was sentenced to 10 years in prison for murder.

While in prison he joined a gang and continued selling drugs. At the same time, he also started attending church services and going to school in prison, eventually obtaining his National Technical Certificate 4 (equivalent to Grade 12). He began to slowly disengage from his gang activities. In 2012 he was released from prison and wanted to pursue a career in music as he had started writing songs and was very interested in hip hop and rap music. However, he fell back into gangsterism and started selling drugs again. He was in and out of jail for a few years until his parents introduced him to the centre where he met his outreach worker. At first he was not interested in the programmes the centre had to offer and he continued selling drugs. Around this time a key drug dealer in his gang died and there was talk of P5 taking over his position. It was at this point that P5 decided to leave the gang and pursue his dream of becoming a musician. He enrolled in the gang intervention programme which he completed successfully. He currently lives at the rehabilitation centre, and was awarded a bursary to study film and media.

#### **Participant 6**

P6 was born in 1983 and grew up exposed to his father being violent towards his mother. At roughly the age of six his parents divorced and he was raised by his mother. While in primary school his mother started drinking and clubbing on the weekends, and would leave him with his grandmother. For a short while he lived with his aunt, who provided him with love and structure. In high school he started smoking cigarettes, drinking, and then using drugs. He dropped out of school in Grade 11, and joined a gang around the same time, looking for a father figure.

He continued using drugs while in the gang, and also spent several months in prison which made him into a harder person. When he was released from prison a friend of his was killed by a rival gang and he and his gang retaliated which started a gang war. P6 went to prison for a second time where he was introduced to religion through a church service, which was instrumental in him changing his life. When he was released from prison he backed away from gangsterism but still used drugs. His family had kicked him out of their home and he was living on the streets. Eventually he went to them for help and they took him to the centre where they enrolled in their gang intervention and rehabilitation programmes. After completing the programmes he became a leader at the rehabilitation centre and met his current girlfriend, also an ex-drug addict. He worked at the centre for three years, after which time he started doing

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<sup>16</sup> This is the South African street name for methaqualone.

construction work with his stepfather and also outreach work with his church – working with youngsters at risk of using drugs and joining gangs. He lives with his mother, stepfather and step siblings, but wants to move out and become more independent.

### **Participant 7**

Born in 1984, P7 grew up in a poor household, raised by his mother. His father was not actively involved in his upbringing. He felt he was the “black sheep” of the family, with his brother being a “mommy’s boy”. At the age of 14 he decided to join a gang, feeling that they could offer him a sense of belonging, money and food. He saw the drug merchant of the gang as a father figure, but later realised that the merchant only used P7 to sell drugs for him. While in the gang he started drinking and smoking “tik”<sup>17</sup>. He was expelled from school in Grade 10.

For five years he sold drugs for the gang, and for the last two years of his gang membership he mainly just used drugs. He was arrested for possession of a weapon and faced fifteen years’ imprisonment. When the case later went to court he was given a three-year suspended sentence. Around the same time of his arrest, he was accused by his gang of stealing drugs from them. He was confronted by one of his fellow gang members who had been ordered to kill P7 for this offence. P7 denied the accusation and this member decided to let him go, telling him he needed to go look after his son – his girlfriend at the time had recently given birth. P7 also became very ill with double pneumonia, but later recovered. At 22 he left the gang life and converted to Christianity. Four months after telling his gang he would be leaving, he was stabbed by a rival gang. P7 approached the Centre looking for work soon after he left his gang. At the time they were not able to offer him any payment and so he began working for the supermarket industry, as he needed to provide financially for his son. In 2010 he grew tired of the “corporate world” and began volunteering at the centre. When the gang intervention programme began a couple of years after that he became employed as their public educator. P7 is engaged and he and his fiancé have a daughter together. He is passionate about music and has released a music video.

### **Participant 8**

P8 was born in 1990 and grew up exposed to drug smuggling through his family, thinking that the drug business was a way in which to be successful in life. His mother was a prostitute whom he saw only a couple of times a year. He was raised mainly by his great-grandmother (up until the age of 11, when she passed away) and then by his grandmother. He did not have a relationship with his father, and felt that his grandmother favoured her own children over him. At roughly the age of 12 he started smoking marijuana and becoming violent towards his peers. At 13 he went to a reformatory, and around that time became a member of a gang. He was in and out of prison for several years, joining the Numbers gangs at 16. He was involved in an armed house robbery and was on the run from the police for 2.5 years. In 2013 he was arrested for an armed hijacking and was sentenced to three years in prison. His fellow gang members had snitched on him, which resulted in his arrest.

While in prison he started reflecting on what negative path the rest of his life might take if he were to remain in the gang, after seeing his name engraved on his bedpost (which made him realise he was in the same prison cell he had been in ten years previously). He made a decision to leave the gang life, embraced Christianity and started attending school in prison, obtaining his National Technical Certificate 2 (Equivalent to Grade 10). When confronting the Number’s gang in prison that he was leaving, he came to the realisation that the sense of brotherhood they purported to offer was hollow. While in prison both his grandmother and mother passed away. When he was released from prison he decided he wanted to set a positive example for his younger brothers. He approached the Centre where he was given a job. His uncle (whom he had

<sup>17</sup> The street name for crystal methamphetamine in Cape Town.

been close to and who had been in the gang life with him) was found dead – killed by a rival gang - and P8 was tempted to take revenge. He and his fellow gang members went to the rival gang members' house, armed and intending to open fire on the rival gang. However, while in the car P8 changed his mind, coming to the realisation that this violence would be “foolish” and that it would not bring his uncle back. In 2016 P8’s contract with the Centre came to an end. He now works part time selling clothes, and has a desire to build a rehabilitation centre in. He has been summoned to appear in court regarding old drug-related charges that had previously been dismissed, but were now being re-opened. Despite the possibility that these charges could lead to prosecution, he believes he will not go back to a life of crime and gangsterism as his faith will help him to stay strong.

### **Participant 9**

P9 was born in 1986. His mother was an alcoholic, and his father used to sell drugs for a gang. His older brothers were also involved in a gang. While his father provided financially for the family, P9 did not have an emotional connection with him. As a result of all of this, P9 felt he had an unstable upbringing. Despite this, he performed well at primary school and was a top student. When he entered high school he became affiliated with the Bad Boys gang. Soon after he met a General from a gang who provided P9 with “tik”. He began using and selling drugs when he went out clubbing on the weekends, and became the protector of the General, moving in with him when his parents lost their home.

While the General was a prominent gang member and supplied P9 with drugs, P9 also saw him as a father figure. In Grade 11 he was arrested for drug possession and dealing and was given a suspended sentence. Around the same time he was awarded a scholarship to study at a tertiary institution. In his final year of school he was involved in a gang conflict on school property and was threatened with expulsion. He decided to leave the school and become a gang member, although he did not ever “take a tattoo” with them. P9 became known as a hitman in the gang, despite the fact that he never actually shot anyone. While in the gang three people close to P9 were killed as a result of gang violence, and P9 himself had a couple of close encounters with death. At some point his gang suspected he was associating with a rival gang.

P9 decided to back away from his gang activities. He continued using drugs, and would rob people to support his drug habit. At some point he was invited to attend a church service and he decided to go. At the church service he converted to Christianity and decided to join the rehabilitation programme the Centre offered at the time. He was clean of drugs for one month, but then relapsed when he got together with old drug-using friends. After the relapse he committed to attending the rehabilitation programme, but used drugs while he was on his way there. When he arrived at the programme his bags were searched (along with the other programme participants), and P9 admitted that the drugs they found were his. The pastor at the programme told P9 he would give him a second chance, and P9 committed to stopping drugs for good, which he did. He went on to become a leader at the rehabilitation programme, after which he came back to work at the Centre. He also qualified as a social auxiliary worker, gaining the highest mark in his class. When the gang intervention programme began he started work as an outreach worker. P9’s father died in early 2016. He lives with his mother and brother (who uses drugs), and has a girlfriend.

### **Participant 10**

P10 was born in 1971. His father was an alcoholic although he tried to provide love and support to P10 and his siblings. His mother worked full-time in order to support the family. P10’s younger brother died in a car accident when P10 was growing up, which left P10 as the youngest in the family. His older siblings were very protective of him. At the age of nine P10 and a friend of his were sexually abused by a group of older men. He never told anyone of the

incident until much later in his recovery from substance abuse. The event made him feel as though he always wanted to be surrounded by a group of youngsters, in order to gain protection and belonging. He performed well in school and was a member of the “clever but tough” group. In high school he became involved in the anti-apartheid school riots, eventually having to leave school because he was wanted by the police. No longer in school, he started hanging out with gang members, drinking and smoking marijuana with them. At the age of 16 he joined a gang, where he found acceptance and protection. He continuously used drugs while in the gang, and also served three prison sentences, joining one of the Numbers gangs while in prison.

In his early thirties, while in prison serving his third sentence, he started to attend the rehabilitation and education programmes on offer, while still remaining in the Numbers gang. When he was released from prison he no longer involved himself in gang activities as he did not have a desire to be a gang member anymore – he felt that gangsterism was much more “evil” and violent than it had been before he was in prison. However, he used his status as a gangster to continue using drugs. After a few years his girlfriend at the time (also a drug user) fell pregnant. He only found out when she had the baby (a boy) that he was the father. At first, he contemplated committing suicide because the mother did not want him to have anything to do with the child. P10 went to his own mother to ask for help. She helped to enrol him in the rehabilitation programme which he completed successfully, later becoming a leader for the programme. He returned to the centre and helped in starting their current rehabilitation centre. He worked as a facilitator for the Centre for a number of years, running support groups for addicts, and when the gang intervention programme started he started working as an outreach worker. In 2012 he got married and lives with his wife, her two daughters, and his son.

### **Participant 11**

P11 was born in 1960. He had 10 siblings, with two of his older brothers being prominent gang members. His father, who had two families with different women, was not a very involved parent. P11 moved schools a lot growing up. As a child and teenager he aspired to be a gangster like his brothers, and could not wait to grow up. He started pickpocketing, and eventually landed up in a reformatory school when he was roughly 13. Around that time he became active in a gang, with his hatred towards white people fuelling his desire to be a gangster, as he saw it as a means to get back at them for apartheid. In 1978 he was sent to prison for three years where he joined one of the Numbers gangs. When he was released in 1981 he got married and decided to leave the gang, wanting to provide for his wife financially through legitimate employment.

For a number of years he worked for a printing company, but in 1991 he lost his job. He had been involved in the trade union movement and there were a number of legal cases against him. Around this time he bumped into his older brothers, who were still active in the gang business. He started delivering drugs for them which soon led to him being actively involved in a gang again, working his way up to become a leader. In 1999 he was arrested for three murders and sentenced to 25 years in prison. While in prison he was visited by a Christian woman who told him “The Lord says your time is up”. Soon after he converted to Christianity. While in prison he played soccer and attended school, completing his National Technical Certificate 4. He went on to study Theology but has not finished his degree due to lack of funding. He was released from prison in 2014 and currently works for a church in the study community who pay him a stipend. He also teaches life orientation at a high school in the area. He is married to the same woman he married in 1981, and they have three children together.

### **Participant 12**

The oldest of the participants in this study, P12 was born in 1953. He grew up in a good but strict household with both of his parents being involved in his upbringing. At the age of 11 he was caught by his parents for bunking school, and his father threatened to put him in a girl’s

dress and send him walking around the neighbourhood as punishment. P12 decided to run away from home and met a young boy of a similar age. He moved in with the boy and his family where he stayed for six months, until his uncle found him and brought him back home. Several months later he got a hiding for misbehaviour and ran away again. At 13 he started hanging out with pickpocketers, and at 14 he was caught breaking into a car and sent to a reformatory. At the reformatory there were three boys who wanted to sodomise him and he stabbed one of them in response. He ended up running away from the reformatory and did training in bricklaying. Around the same time, he joined a gang, and was one of the youngest members.

In 1971 he was attacked by a member of a rival gang, and he and his fellow gang members retaliated by attacking twelve of their gang members. He was sentenced to three years in prison for his part in this violence, and while there had another two years added to his sentence. While in prison he joined the Numbers gang. After serving his sentence he was out of jail for seven months, and then sent back to serve eight years (he was given three years at first, but another five were added on while he was in prison). While in the gang P12 also smuggled and used drugs. In 1991 he was sentenced to 18 years in prison for nine attempted murders. He appealed the case and the charges ended up being dropped – he only served 18 months in jail. Winning his appeal was pivotal in him leaving the gang, as he saw it as God giving him a second chance in life. When he was released from prison he did not go back to his gang, but did continue using drugs, while also working as a bricklayer. In 1993 he married his wife, whom he had been with for 15 years and with whom he had 5 children. In 1995 a work colleague invited him to a church service which he attended. At the service he converted to Christianity and decided to stop using drugs. In 2012 he was approached by the centre to work for the gang intervention programme. He was employed as a violence interrupter which is his current position.

In the following two sections I provide a framework and brief overview for the findings presented in this chapter and the following one, highlighting the narrative sequence followed by the participants in their desistance process.

### **5.1.1 Framework and overview**

Central to the participants' stories of the process of desistance was a transformation in their identity as they moved from a gangster identity to a more prosocial identity. Drawing largely on identity theory, the current chapter focuses on this identity transformation. Also key to the participants' stories of desistance was that they drew on prosocial identities as well as protective resources within themselves and their environments in leaving the gang and maintaining their reform. Using a resilience lens and an interactional theoretical framework, this will be the focus of the following chapter. Thus, I purport that the desistance process involves both an identity transformation as well as the drawing on of protective resources and prosocial identities.

While I present the participants' identity transformation first in this chapter and how their prosocial identities and protective resources supported their desistance in the following

chapter, this is not to say that this reflects the time order of the participants' desistance. Rather, I argue that their process of desistance is an interactional one, in that their identity transformation is supported and shaped by their context in a recursive relationship. For most participants their stories of identity transformation began with the experience of disillusionment with what the gang purported to offer; namely, support and brotherhood. For many, this disillusionment arose as a result of a particular negative gang-related experience. The realisation that the gang could no longer offer them what they wanted contributed to their decision to exit the gang life. For a few participants, committing to fatherhood also played a key role in this decision-making process.

Some other participants' stories of identity transformation did not focus on this disillusionment pathway, but rather what I call an *absolution* pathway. While for all the participants religion was key to their process of desistance, for some, religious conversion was more central to their identity transformation from gangsters to prosocial beings. For these participants religious experiences offered a means by which they could absolve themselves of crimes committed when in the gang, and thereby let go of their gangster identity. Through this transformation they became more empathic individuals who could express and manage their feelings, as well as make amends for their past. Importantly, some participants who did not follow this *absolution* pathway also experienced this emotional transformation. All of the participants shared stories of embracing more prosocial identities after leaving the gang. This included, for example, occupying a religious identity and being a positive role model in their communities through "giving back" and setting an example to others through their reformed lifestyles. These identities supported the participants in maintaining their reform and in managing challenges they faced, by giving them a sense of responsibility, meaning and purpose, and accountability for their behaviour (which will be the focus of the following chapter).

The participants' stories of desistance also focused on the protective resources within themselves and their environments that they actively drew on in their process of leaving the gang and maintaining reform (the focus of the following chapter). They formed a deliberate and purposeful intention to change their lives (thereby demonstrating agency), and took personal responsibility for their past and their future. Upon deciding to leave the gang many drew on social support systems in their environment, turning to loved ones, religious institutions, and community members to help them exit the gang. These social support systems also helped participants to maintain their reformed lives by offering them continued emotional and practical support.

Before turning to my analysis, I present an overview of the identity literature and the role identity transformation may play in the process of desistance, in order to contextualise my own findings.

## **5.2 The role of identity transformation in desistance**

There has been increasing interest in the role personal identity plays in desistance (Bachman et al., 2016; Bubolz & Simi, 2015; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster et al., 2016; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009), with some arguing that the process of desistance involves an individual intentionally changing their identity from that of “offender” to “non-offender” (King, 2013a; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009, p. 149). However, others have argued against including a change in identity in the desistance process, as it implies that someone who has stopped offending for a significant period of time but who has not experienced a strong identity change would not be considered a “true” desister (Bottoms et al., 2004). I acknowledge this argument and agree that for some the process of desistance may not include a change in identity, but given that identity transformation emerged centrally from my participants’ narratives, and given its centrality in the desistance literature (see for example, Decker et al. (2014) and Paternoster and Bushway( 2009), I have chosen to focus on it in this study.

Identity is theorised about across a range of contemporary social science subjects, including psychology, sociology and political science. It has also been variously defined, with some using the term to refer to the culture of a people, others using it to refer to identification with a social category (as in social identity theory), and yet others who define identity as a person’s sense of self, “composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies” (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 284). In this context, roles refer to the expectations connected to positions an individual occupies in his/her network of relationships. Identities, therefore, “are internalised role expectations” (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 286). This study is in line with this final definition and also recognises that identity is multifaceted in that it is comprised of multiple identities or selves that are arranged hierarchically, so that some identities are more prominent than others (Bubolz & Simi, 2015; Burke & Reitzes, 1991; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Stryker & Burke, 2000). For instance, a person may identify as a drug dealer, a father, and a trustworthy partner in crime simultaneously, but not all these identities will be drawn on or be relevant at all times (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). The degree to which an identity is drawn on by an individual is dependent on the relative importance of that

identity as it relates to specific roles, on how much verification an individual receives from others for that identity and on the wider social context, which determines what kind of identities are available at a given point in time (Bubolz & Simi, 2015; Farrall et al., 2011; Healy, 2014; Stryker & Burke, 2000).

A person's sense of self (identity) can motivate and direct his/her behaviour and actions: people act and behave in ways that are congruent with who they believe they are, and also in ways that result in social confirmation from others of their identity (Burke & Reitzes, 1991; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). However, behaviour is not only driven by human agency – it is also dependent on the environment in which the behaviour takes places (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009).

During the period of adolescence an individual's identity forms and grows significantly (Decker et al., 2014; Erikson, 1968). It is common for adolescents to explore multiple identities, some of which may be prominent for an extended period of time, others of which are more temporary. As adolescents move into adulthood these identities continue to play an important role in their development (Decker et al., 2014). For some adolescents their identity development may involve adopting an antisocial identity through becoming a member of an antisocial group such as a gang (Decker et al., 2014).

During adolescence individuals may have mixed feelings about who they are and where they fit into society and thus experiment with different behaviours and activities. Concurrently, they have a need to reconcile their own identity with society's expectations, and to have it supported by their peers (Erikson, 1968; Owen & Greeff, 2015). Adolescents whose childhoods were characterised by family neglect and rejection, violence and victimisation may not achieve a sense of trust and autonomy in adolescence and as a result will be drawn to the brotherhood, acceptance, esteem and power that the gang can offer (Owen & Greeff, 2015). However, if or when these expectations of the gang are not met, the individual may become disillusioned with the gang and start devaluing their identity as a gang member (Berger et al., 2016; Bubolz & Simi, 2015). During this process the individual may come to see delinquent activities as being incompatible with who they are, and begin to distance him- or herself from his/her criminal identity, embracing a new, typically more prosocial identity, such as that of a father or employee (Bubolz & Simi, 2015; King, 2013a; Vaughan, 2007).

Having briefly reviewed the literature on identity and the role it may play in desistance, I now give an overview of the identity transformation of the participants in this study, connecting it to other desistance and identity research where applicable. Throughout

this chapter and the following one, I have chosen to present my findings alongside other research in order to provide a coherent and integrated analysis.

### **5.3 Overview of the identity transformation of the participants**

In this study, the participants' stories demonstrated that they experienced a profound transformation in their identity during their process of desistance. This was perhaps most powerfully illustrated through the words of P2 who seemed to have a clear and defining moment in which he rejected the gangster identity: "I burnt out all my tattoos, all over myself, with a hot iron and acid, because I'm done with gangsterism now – I'm done with that life". As is so strongly evident in P2's words, the participants' narratives illustrated a strong commitment to leaving behind their gangster identity. Their identity transformation was a process that occurred gradually. It included (for most) a growing disillusionment with the gang; usually prompted by a negative gang-related experience, for some a sense of absolution for their past gang life, as well as the embracing of a prosocial identity. Below I give an overview of each of these themes, briefly connecting them to existing desistance theoretical frameworks. In the sections that follow, I discuss these themes in more detail.

The process of identity transformation began for many participants with a negative gang-related experience which led them to reflect on their gang life. This is echoed in identity-related gang desistance theories: According to both Decker et al. (2014) and Berger et al.'s (2016) theoretical frameworks, the desistance process involves having particular experiences that prompt leaving the gang (Decker et al., 2014) or challenge the gang member's worldview by forcing them to explore whether being in a gang is what they truly want for themselves (Berger et al., 2016). However, for some participants in the current study, a desire to leave the gang, or a reluctance to be a gang member, was present before having these particular experiences, but the desire to leave only came to fruition after having particular experiences that resonated with them. This may reflect "first doubts" – concerns gang members may have regarding their gang identity which may be present for some time at the back of their minds (Decker et al., 2014, p. 269). The identity transformation process was not necessarily a linear one for the participants and for some involved movement between a gangster and more prosocial identity for some time, before fully committing to leaving behind the gangster identity. Indeed in the process of desistance – and relatedly identity transformation - individuals may revert to former identity roles (Decker et al., 2014; Densley & Pyrooz, 2017).

A growing disillusionment with what the gang purportedly offered - namely support and brotherhood - was common to many of the participants' stories of identity transformation, and for most emerged as a result of negative gang-related experiences which functioned as turning points in their desistance. Disillusionment is a key factor in Bubolz and Simi's (2015) identity-related cognitive-emotional theory of gang exit where it refers to the discrepancy between the identity standards associated with the expectations of being a gang member (including protection, a source of income, and a family structure) and the actual reality of gang involvement. This discrepancy results in feelings of anger and reduces the importance of the gang identity (Bubolz & Simi, 2015). For the participants in the current study, this disillusionment led to the realisation that the gang identity no longer resonated with them, and they decided to exit the gang life. For a few participants their desire to commit to fatherhood – another turning point - was also important in this decision-making process.

Coupled with the sense of disillusionment with the gang, the participants' stories also demonstrated a fear for what may become of them if they were to stay gang members. This draws on the notion of the ““feared self” - an image of what the person does not want to be or fears becoming” (Paternoster et al., 2016, p. 1206). According to Paternoster and Bushway's (2009) identity-related theory of desistance, an individual becomes motivated to change their ways as a result of the fear they have of the self they could become if they do not change. In the current study, participants feared being alone and unsupported as well as disability and death. This, along with the disillusionment they experienced, seemed to motivate their decision to leave the gang life.

While for all participants religion was integral to their desistance process, for some, particular religious experiences (another turning point) were more significant to their identity transformation in that religion offered them a means of absolution where they could let go of their gangster identity, and relatedly the crimes they committed, and move towards a new identity – one from which they could make amends for their past crimes, express and manage their feelings, as well as become more aware of other people's feelings. This may refer to what Miller (2004) termed quantum change: “sudden, dramatic, and enduring transformations that affect a broad range of personal emotion, cognition, and behaviour” (p. 453). Importantly, this transformation does not merely result in a change of behaviour, but rather a complete change in the person's identity (Miller 2004). In the desistance literature specifically, religion is recognised as a potential mechanism of desistance given that it offers forgiveness for past sins, and also a “blueprint” for how to live one's life as a changed

individual (Giordano, Longmore, Schroeder, & Seffrin, 2008, p. 102; Schroeder & Frana, 2009).

After having left their gangs, all the participants began to embrace more prosocial identities including becoming religious and being positive role models to their families and in their communities. According to both Bubolz and Simi (2015) and Berger et al.'s (2016) theories, once individuals have de-identified as gang members, they begin to adopt new identities by, for example, becoming religious or embracing the parenting role. This draws on the notion of the "possible self" (Paternoster et al., 2016, p. 1206). While the "feared self" provides the initial step in the desistance process, in order to maintain this process the individual needs to construct a new more prosocial idea of who they want to be (Paternoster et al., 2016). In the current study, the participants occupied a caring and mentorship role with their families (which for many involved being providers and protectors), and in their communities they set a positive example for others through their changed behaviour and through giving back to society through their work. All of this will be discussed in more detail in the sections below, starting with the process of identity transformation followed by the participants, and integrating their stories with the literature.

#### **5.4 Identity transformation as a process with turning points**

Many participants shared stories of negative experiences that prompted them to reflect on their gang life, reject their gangster identity, and ultimately leave the gang. Before exiting his gang and stopping drug use P2 was arrested by the police for possession of illegal ammunition in his home:

**P2:** The police caught me with magazine bullets. And then I talked me out of it, I got me out of it, I was beaten out - very, very badly. This is then when I decided no man, enough is enough. I can't go on like this. I sell drugs for one person but then, the next time then I get caught then I must go to jail and no one is there for me and only my family turns up.

After this event, P2 told his family of his decision to leave gangsterism and stop drugs, and went to the Centre where he enrolled in their rehabilitation programme. For him, this negative experience seemed to encourage reflection on his gang membership, which led to his decision to exit the gang life. He also discussed wanting to be a "mirror" for his son as motivating his change, saying "that's why I decided to change - for myself, and for my son"

Importantly P2 - like some other participants - appeared to have a desire to change well before this event of being caught with the ammunition. When discussing his relationship with his mother while he was a gang member he noted that at times she would say to him: “Don’t you want to change your life?” and he would respond: “No man that is not for me. Not now, I don’t want to change my life now. I will change my life, but not now”. This illustrates that desistance and, relatedly, identity transformation is not necessarily a single event or even a series of events; rather, it is best understood as a process that occurs gradually over time (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). This is perhaps most clear in P10’s story who noted that while in prison he “didn’t really have … that desire of being a gangster, it wasn’t for me anymore”. However, he still remained in the Numbers gang while at the same time engaging in more prosocial activities:

**P10:** I did really ... try to change for good. I did partake in everything that is good even though I was a prison gangster. I did belong to the church group ... I did all my social work classes that I supposed to attend ... So I did do lot of positive things in prison to make the change ... But I had also the Number, because the Number was ... now my protection and who I am now in prison.

This demonstrates a fluidity between the gangster and non-gangster identities. On the one hand P10 wanted to leave gangsterism and his actions in prison illustrate a commitment to this. On the other hand, he still identified as a Numbers gang member as it was part of who he was while in prison, and there was also an instrumental element to this identity, as it offered him protection. While P10 may have had clarity in his desire to leave his gang, this did not automatically lead to a decisive life change. Those involved in criminal and gang activities may become accustomed to the delinquent subculture, making it difficult to exit (Maruna, 1997). Relatedly, desistance research shows that moving towards desistance can include wavering between criminality and a more prosocial lifestyle (Haigh, 2009). With regards to gang desistance specifically, individuals may move between a gangster and former gangster identity (particularly if they have social or emotional ties with the gang) for some time before fully committing to disengaging from the gang life (Decker et al., 2014; Densley & Pyrooz, 2017). Furthermore, in a South African context, the Numbers gang in prison offers members genuine protection from harm, making leaving the gang a risk (Lindegard & Gear, 2014).

When P10 was released from prison he no longer saw himself as a gangster, stating that before his time in prison gangsterism had not been so “evil”. He said: “And I [was] sure, no I won’t make it in this, coz [because] I lost a lot of friends along this way. So I said no man”, illustrating that he may have feared the danger and violence related to being in a gang (Bolden, 2013). However, P10 used his gang status to continue supporting his drug habit: “I became totally just a drug addict nothing to do with gangs anymore. I just, I’m just known as a gangster but not actually involved in gang activities and whatever”. A few years down the line he became a father and this seemed to prompt his commitment to changing his life for good: “And there I did make my mind up: no, I can’t drug because his mother also drugged and I had to make a change”. P10 went to visit his own mother who told him about the rehabilitation programme offered at the Centre. He completed the programme and went on to work full-time for the Centre.

P10’s story illustrates that he may have drawn on multiple identities over time and in different contexts. For instance, while in prison he made use of his Numbers gang identity when he needed protection, but perhaps when attending the programmes offered in prison he drew on a different, non-gangster identity. He moved between the gangster and non-gangster identity for some time before fully committing to changing his life when he became a father and enrolled in a rehabilitation programme. It may be that P10’s identity as a parent and drug-free man began to overshadow his identity as a gangster and drug user (Decker et al., 2014).

P2’s narrative is slightly different in that while he – like P10 - had a desire to leave the gang life for quite some time, he only acted on this desire after he had had the negative experience of being caught with the ammunition. P1’s story was similar, in that it illustrated he was not fully committed to his gang involvement. When discussing becoming an official member of his gang he said: “I actually didn’t want to take a tattoo”. When I asked him to elaborate on this he responded:

**P1:** I did see what my brothers (*who were in a gang*) ... went through. But now I know hey if I’m gonna take this tattoo, I think at the end of the day it’s gonna turn the same way out that my brothers did. My brothers was for years in jail.

Despite his concern that he may end up like his brothers, P1 did take a tattoo and was a member of his gang for several years. But while he was a member his reservations persisted: “When they talk in a gang group, you have to be focused, you have to take

everything that they talk, like you have to take it here (*he points to his head*). But I didn't take it here, you see". At 22 years of age P1 was arrested and put in jail for three months. His fellow gang members did not bail him out of jail and he came to realise that the gang life was "not for [him]". When I asked him to explain what contributed to him thinking this way he responded:

**P1:** When I realised my own friends didn't care for me ...They didn't bail me out.

**JK:** Mmm. So is it that you felt, you didn't feel supported by them?

**P1:** Mmm, but I did everything that they said.

Although not discussed directly by P1, it is probable that being in jail for those three months reminded him of his fear that he might follow the same path as his brothers and end up "for years" in jail. Soon after deciding the gang life was not for him, P1 found out that his girlfriend was pregnant. At first they ended the relationship and P1 – similar to P10 - went to his mother and used drugs in front of her (even though he no longer identified as a gangster he, like P10, continued using drugs). She asked him: "Wil jy help hê?" [Do you want help?], to which he responded: "Ja, Ma" [Yes, Mom]. She took him to the Centre and he enrolled in their rehabilitation programme. Soon after, he and his girlfriend reunited and later married. At the time of our first interview P1 was struggling to find employment and had relapsed into using drugs again. At our second interview, several months later, he was clean of drugs and completing a Seaman's course with the hope of finding employment once the course was finished.

P1, P2 and P10's experiences discussed above may be illustrative of turning points.

Historically, the desistance literature on turning points has focused on prosocial, external events - such as marriage or the birth of a child - that can alter the criminal trajectory. However, recent work has broadened the concept to include adverse life events and experiences - including, for example, incarceration and violent victimisation - that may have more relevance for gang members (Roman et al., 2017; Sampson & Laub, 2016).

Turning points function by informing gang members of "the disadvantages of staying in the gang and the advantages of adopting a different lifestyle" (Berger et al., 2016, p. 3; Decker et al., 2014). Giordano et al. (2002) refer to these experiences as "hooks for change" (p. 992): occurrences in a person's life when they choose to leave the criminal lifestyle (Grekul & LaRocque, 2011; MacRae-Krisa, 2011). Fatherhood, incarceration or fear of incarceration or danger have all been identified as motivating factors or touchstones in desistance from

gangsterism (Berger et al., 2016; Bolden, 2013; Chu et al., 2015; Decker et al., 2014; Moloney et al., 2009). Importantly, though, P1, P2 and P10's reservations over their gang involvement or their intention to change were present well before these turning points; illustrating that transformation is a process that occurs over time.

For these participants their desire to change came to fruition after having particular experiences that resonated with and were personally meaningful to them and led them to reflect on whether being in a gang was what they really wanted for themselves. P1 and P2 experienced growing reservations over their gang involvement: P1 started feeling unsupported by his gang as a result of them not bailing him out of prison, despite him doing everything they asked of him, and P2 started feeling this way when he thought about the possibility of going to prison and not having his gang brothers come to see him. P10 did not have a particular negative experience that prompted him to reflect on his gang life, but the loss of his friends and his fear of where he might end up if he continued being a gang member seemed to play a role in his decision to reject the gangster identity.

For all three participants, fatherhood also seemed to facilitate their identity transformation: For P10, the experience of becoming a father seemed to prompt his final commitment to change his life in that he felt he needed to stop using drugs in order to care for his son. For P2, his desire to be a positive role model for his son was a motivating factor in his decision to change. Although not said directly in his interview, it is possible that for P1 the experience of learning he was to become a father cemented his commitment to stopping drugs. His later relapse illustrates the complexity of desistance – that it is fraught with challenges and difficulties, and – like with P10's story - is not necessarily a linear process. However, P1 was able to manage and overcome his relapse – the details of which will be discussed in the chapter on leaving the gang and maintaining reform.

## **5.5 Disillusionment**

### **5.5.1 The belonging and support offered by the gang**

P1 and P2's stories above (P1: "I realised my own friends didn't care for me .... They didn't bail me out"; P2: "I sell drugs for one person but then, the next time then I get caught then I must go to jail and no one is there for me and only my family turns up") of no longer feeling supported by their gang brothers stands in contrast to the participants' stories of becoming and being a gang member, where one of the appeals of the gang was the belonging and support purportedly offered, a finding common in other gang-related research - both internationally and in South Africa (Alleyne & Wood, 2010; Anderson, 2009; Burnett, 1999;

Daniels & Adams, 2010; Moloney et al., 2009; Owen & Greeff, 2015; van der Merwe & Swanepoel, 2017; Van Wyk, 2001; Wijnberg & Green, 2014).

One of the needs of young people is companionship, something which the gang can provide (O'Brien et al., 2013). This may be particularly relevant for youngsters who do not gain a sense of belonging through their families. For instance, P1 noted that his gang: “[gave] me the love my mother and my father didn't give me”. P11 said that as a gangster you have “your own world, your own laws”. When I asked him to explain what he meant he responded: “That's that brotherhood, that's that caring, coz when you gang fight, then you see somebody covering your back, with knives and stuff. And you see those things happen, you think that's where you belong”. Relatedly, P12 noted: “But that time we had a war, even we are two, and twenty guys that take us, we never run away from each other, we will rather die together. That was the rule”. Seeing others who are willing to stand up for you and even risk death for you, is likely to facilitate feelings of solidarity and camaraderie amongst gang members, as evidenced in both international and South African research (Anderson, 2009; Taylor et al., 2015; Van Wyk, 2001).

### **5.5.2 Disillusionment with support and belonging offered by the gang**

Over time, however, this ideal of brotherhood no longer held true for the participants, as can be seen in P1 and P2's stories above. It may be that as a result of negative experiences with the gang (such as not feeling adequately supported by them), the participants moved from a social identity in the gang where brotherhood was important and valued, to a more individualistic identity where they focused on their personal growth and responsibility-taking (Kolind et al., 2017; Wood, 2014). This may be illustrative of the key difference between crime and gang desistance: While desistance from crime involves disengaging from criminal behaviour, desistance from gangs involves not only stopping criminal activities but also leaving a peer network where a particular social identity is valued. In Daniels and Adams (2010) South African study, former gang members replaced their gangster identity with a personal identity from which they took responsibility for their behaviour and committed themselves to a new vision for the future. While in the past they followed the collective identity of the gang, adhering to its norms and rules, a shift in focus to their personal identity meant they had the freedom to focus on their personal needs and aspirations.

In the current study, this shift in identity seemed to be most clear in P8's story of leaving his gang. While in prison serving a three year sentence for armed robbery, P8 started reflecting on his life as a gangster. In his prison cell he saw that his name and a friend's name

were scratched onto the bedpost and he realised that he was in the same cell he had been in as a 13-year-old teenager 10 years before (the cell he was in was previously part of the juvenile section of the prison):

**P8:** And I'm like, yoh [wow]. I look back 10 years from now, look where I am, right where I started. And if I'm gonna take another 10 years from now, if I'm not dead, I'm in a wheelchair or something is wrong with me, what's gonna happen? And, I start telling myself no, this is where it all changes, this time.

Seeing his name on the bedpost triggered P8 into thinking about the potential negative path the rest of his life might take. His story - as well as P1, P2 and P10's stories above - draws on the idea of the ““feared self” - an image of what the person does not want to be or fears becoming” (Paternoster et al., 2016, p. 1206). The ““feared self” is argued to be a key component in initiating the change in identity that is central to the desistance process. The individual becomes motivated to change because of the fear they have of the self they could become if they do not change (Paternoster et al., 2016; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). P1 and P2 seemed to fear ending up alone and unsupported, P10 feared he would not survive in the gang, and P8 feared disability and death. However, in order to maintain desistance the individual needs to start constructing a more prosocial role for themselves (Paternoster et al., 2016; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009), which will be discussed in more detail in section 5.7.

At the time P8 was reflecting on his gang life and realising he wanted to change, he was a member of one of the Numbers gangs - the 26s - in prison:

**P8:** The moment I said to the 26s that “guys I'm gonna change my life, I'm gonna leave these things”. They were like “What?! How can you do this? Because now if you gonna do this we gonna take back the ranks that we gave you”. And I'm like “what ranks did you give me? You gave me nothing. All you gave me was heart ache and pain” you understand. They, they make all these promises telling you that, ja [yes], should anything happen to you it'll happen to them also. Like, in Afrikaans sê hulle dat “my broer ons kan saam jou verdale, ja, wat jy verdale, verdale ons”, verstaan. Which means that, if anything is gonna happen to me, it must happen to them. But, but reality struck. A coffin is made for one, see. If I die now, you understand, I won't get a coffin where you gonna lay next to me, you understand, you

gonna get your own coffin, and I'm gonna get my own coffin, which shows me that, I carry my own package, and you carry your own package, you understand.

P8 came to the realisation that the sense of brotherhood (reflecting a collective or social identity) the gang offered was hollow - in reality you alone are personally responsible for your life (reflecting a more individualistic identity). The tone of his story also suggests feelings of anger, which can be an important precursor to leaving the gang: When individuals come to the realisation that the gang does not provide what they initially thought it would provide, this can bring about anger and resentment (Bubolz & Simi, 2015). P8's experience of anger may have helped him to realise the incongruence between his expectation of gangsterism (a sense of brotherhood) and the reality that "a coffin is made for one" (P8) (Bubolz & Simi, 2015). Indeed P8 - as well as P1 and P2's stories in the section above - clearly illustrate a sense of disillusionment with what the gang offers: support and togetherness.

According to identity theory, disillusionment refers to a state of discontent or resentment which comes about when an individual's expectations of the gang - for example, as offering protection, a surrogate family or income - are not met, thereby reducing the importance of the gang identity (Bubolz & Simi, 2015). While it is often a gradual process, a single dramatic and negative event can lead "to moments of clarity where the perception of gang life changes substantially" (Bubolz & Simi, 2015, p. 336; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002).

Disillusionment is a common reason cited by former gang members - both in South Africa and abroad - for their desistance (Berger et al., 2016; Bubolz, 2014; Carson et al., 2013; Chalas & Grekul, 2017; Chu et al., 2015; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Wijnberg & Green, 2014). This disillusionment can relate to feeling the gang is not supportive enough or believing one is being taken advantage of by peers in the gang (Berger et al., 2016; Carson & Vecchio, 2015), which was the case with the participants in Wijnberg and Green's (2014) South African study on gang desistance, who reported that they felt exploited and unsupported by their fellow gang members, and thus felt that they were not adequately benefitting from their membership. In the current study P1, P2, and P8 felt disillusioned by the brotherhood of the gang. For P7, his disillusionment related to the realisation that the drug dealer whom he had seen as a father figure when he joined a gang did not see P7 as a son:

**P7:** And I took ... the drug dealer I took him as my father. I went there with that mentality. And, that basically um, that basically didn't do much, because he didn't take me as his son – he took me as a normal person he can use.

P7's own father was absent from his life. When I asked him what this was like he responded:

**P7:** It was hard, tough, sometimes I cried at school, didn't understand why I was born, stuff like that. Confusing. So, ja, grew up as a teenager. When I was turning 14/15, I decided I was gonna join a gang because I didn't know where I belong, what is my purpose really.

The gang likely initially fulfilled P7's need for a father figure, love and purpose for a period of time. However, participants like P2, P7 and P8, ultimately came to realise, through a process of reflection, that this sense of belonging the gang offered was not real or that it did not resonate with them anymore – the way they thought about their gang life transformed, and their social identity as gang members was no longer as important to them (Bubolz & Simi, 2015). This disillusionment with the gang life led to them making an informed decision to exit their gangs. Contrastingly, the participants also feared what could become of them if they were to stay in the gang life, which also facilitated their identity transformation.

## 5.6 Absolution

While many participants followed the disillusionment pathway in their identity transformation, there were some who followed what I have called the absolution pathway. A turn to religion was common to *all* the participants' stories. This finding is not surprising given that eleven of the participants were recruited for the study through the Centre (a faith-based institution), and the twelfth participant was employed by a church in the study community. It is still an important theme to explore, though, given the pivotal role it played in their lives. All of the participants converted to either Christianity (nine participants) or Islam (three participants) during their process of desistance.

While it is possible that this turn to religion functioned as a rational decision in that it offered the participants a means by which to leave a life of gangsterism, their stories indicated that turning to religion was more than rationalisation in that it enabled them to feel absolved of crimes committed in their past, and thereby let go of their gangster identity, and embrace a new identity from which they were able make amends for past crimes, as well as

express their emotions and empathise with others. The notion of forgiveness is key to a number of religious teachings (Harris, Ackerman, & Haley, 2017). When it comes to desistance, research with former criminal offenders show that religion or spirituality can offer forgiveness for past transgressions (Giordano et al., 2008; Schroeder & Frana, 2009). This finding is echoed in the current study. When P4 discussed leaving the gang his religious beliefs (and his marriage) were prominent to this discussion:

**P4:** That night I did convert. That night, I just feel hey, there's something going off my back, like a heavy thingy ... But like I say, it's unexplainable, it was, I was relieved from something man. Like there was something on me man. Like was heavy on my, on my back but, I, how can I say. I can't explain it man, but that time I was just feeling, was the relief from it, you see.

Converting to Islam seemed to offer P4 an opportunity to relieve himself of a burden. Although he does not say so directly, it is probable that this burden related to guilt he felt over gang-related activities. Indeed elsewhere in his interview he noted (of his gang involvement): "I was involved in horrible cases. Sometimes I did go for trial sometimes, for hijacking and all things, armed robbery".

For other participants, their religious experiences happened while in prison. Indeed prison is a particular social context in which one's identity and life choices are likely to be questioned (Maruna, Wilson, & Curran, 2006; McLean et al., 2017). In 1991 P12 was sentenced to 18 years in prison for nine attempted murders. A year into his sentence he won the appeal on his case and was released from prison six months later: "And then I started thinking no man, God gave me a second chance man, I've got to take this chance, I've got kids that's growing up. Things can't, I will never get this chance again, ever again". He left the gang life, but continued using drugs for a couple of years. One day a work colleague invited him to attend a church service, after which he stopped using drugs:

**P12:** Then I went with him there. Knew as the service was going, my whole life, in a few seconds played off in front, in my mind everything played off. And I saw how many chances God gave me and whatever. And it's almost like I heard a voice in my head say "listen, you not every time gonna get this chance in your life". I didn't, don't know how I got onto the stage and whatever but tears was just rolling and I accepted Jesus into my life. And that's what turned my whole life around.

This church service seemed to be a significant turning point or “hook for change” (Giordano et al., 2002) for P12 when it came to fully embracing a prosocial life. Although he had already left his gang and had legitimate employment, his story suggests that he had not completely committed to his changed lifestyle yet. It is clear that the experience he had at the church service resonated with him, prompting him to actively reflect on his life and then to “turn [his] whole life around”. While P12 does not directly discuss it, the theme of absolution is implicit in his discussion of feeling as though God had given him a second chance in life, which suggests regret over his past life as a gangster. Also implied in P12’s story is that he may have felt he was given an opportunity to make amends for past transgressions. Indeed elsewhere in his interview when discussing his current employment as a violence interrupter<sup>18</sup> he noted: “This job I give back into the community what I took out of the community years before, when I was still a active gang member”. Similarly P4 also discussed making amends for his past crimes: “I’m very glad for the life I live today, because why, that time I was put in the negative for the laaities [youngsters] and so, you see. But today I’m putting the positive for the laaities”. Thus, restitution is part of these participants’ absolution.

P11 shared a similar story to P12. In 1999 he was sentenced to 25 years in prison for three murders. Soon into his prison sentence he was visited by a Christian woman:

**P11:** She said “listen, the Lord say your time is up” ... And the moment I was inside (*in his prison cell*), I go on my knees say “Lord, I see, if you are really existing, then I need you, I got this three murders”. My case was withdrawn on the 7th of the 11th month. And then the 9th of the 11th, I went on my knees and accepted Christ.

One of P11’s murder cases was withdrawn, which meant that he ended up serving 15 years in prison instead of 25. Upon finding this out in prison, he left the gang life and converted to Christianity. Although not discussed directly, it is likely that P11 - like P12 - also felt as though God was giving him a second chance in life, as from his story it appears as though he felt that God was responsible for the withdrawal of one of his cases. Through his current outreach work with a local church in the community, P11 is also able to make amends

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<sup>18</sup> Both P4 and P12 are employed as violence interrupters by the Centre, working to mediate gang violence in their community. A more detailed discussion of the Centre and its gang intervention programme is included in Chapter Four, section 4.4.

for past behaviour: “Now this is [my] way of giving back. Coz I have disrupted our community heavily”.

This partly draws on what Maruna (2001) called the “redemption script” (p. 87). In his work with offenders Maruna (2001) found that desisting individuals developed a forgiving narrative (a redemption script) to make sense of their criminal past (Liem & Richardson, 2014). In this narrative, the convicted offenders constructed themselves as victims of society who became involved in antisocial activities in order to gain a sense of power, and then became ensnared in the cycle of crime and incarceration. Through the support of significant others, they were able to get out of this cycle and achieve what they were “always meant to do”. Feeling newly empowered, they then sought to make amends for their past criminal behaviour by making a positive contribution to society through generative activities (Healy, 2014; Maruna, 2001). While not all aspects of this redemption narrative are applicable to the current study – in particular, the notion of being a victim of society who committed crime in order to gain a sense of power - the idea of wanting to give back to one’s community clearly is evident in the participants’ stories, as can be seen in P4, P11 and P12’s accounts above. This draws on the wounded healer phenomenon (which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six) where an individual has a desire and dedication to help and support others who have, like them, been “wounded” in some way (LeBel et al., 2015). Engaging in generative activities can be understood in relation to Erik Erikson’s theory of human development, in particular the adult stage of generativity versus stagnation. According to Erikson (1950), generativity “is primarily the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation” (p. 267).

Along with self-forgiveness and making amends, another important aspect of the participants’ absolution stories was their ability to empathize with others and express their emotions as a result of religious experiences, which will be the focus of the following section.

### **5.6.1 Emotional awareness and sensitivity**

The participants’ expression of emotions is alluded to in P12’s story above - he discusses crying as a result of his religious conversion. P11’s story of conversion was similar: “By accepting the Lord and by growing, I realise, yoh, I can cry”. Further on he said:

**P11:** And I was so glad when I realise, wow, I can cry, see. Maybe for you it wasn’t something big but I know for me it was. It shows me that now I’m changing. I could cry. And when I sometimes watch a film and I can relate to somebody that gets hurt,

to me that makes sense. And I said Lord thank you, because I was in a place where I had no feeling.

This suggests that while he was a gang member P11 dissociated from his experiences. For P11, and perhaps for other gang members, dissociation may have been necessary. Indeed in his interview he said: “the more you are active in these things, the more you become like hardened, see. It’s almost like your way of survival”. While in the gang, it is likely that the participants were traumatised to varying degrees given the violent lifestyle associated with being a gang member, including perpetration of violence (for instance, some participants identified themselves as “hitmen”). In order to cope with this violence, they may have dissociated from their experiences by numbing themselves emotionally (Kerig et al., 2016). This kind of response would then have been legitimated by other gang members, given the stigma associated with emotional expression in the gang (see P6’s story below on p. 114). However, this changed when participants like P11 had religious encounters, where emotional expression is valued and crying is seen as a normal part of the faith-based experience (Corrigan, 2008). Another place where emotional expression is valued is in a therapeutic situation. Some former gang members in Mandel’s (2006) study reported that mandated therapy while in prison helped them to express their emotions and to feel cared for. This seemed to be similar for participants like P11, but came about as a result of religious experiences.

Along with expressing emotions, P11 also started to feel empathy for others, illustrating a humanization-like process where he transformed from being a hardened gangster to a “feeling” human being. This may reflect that people’s identity - or sense of self - influences their behaviour, as people act and behave in ways that mirror who they believe they are (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). Further, this identity of a feelings person may be verified by the religious network that participants like P11 finds himself in (Stryker & Burke, 2000), thereby reinforcing his desire to adopt this new identity, and abandon his old gangster identity.

P6 also had a religious experience while attending a church service in prison that seemed to result in an intense emotional change in him:

**P6:** So I went there, and then, up till, from that day out I just really can’t explain what happened to me at that point ... Because why, the kind of, the kind of person that I

were, you understand, and what happened to me at that moment when I was by that church event.

P6's story suggests that he felt as though the change he experienced was not within his control – it was happening to him as opposed to him bringing it upon himself (Maruna, 1997). Referring to the church event he said: "So, from that day, my life started changing ... I became a different person". P6 continued attending church services in prison and started disengaging from his gang involvement. However, when he was released from prison he, like some other participants, started using drugs again for several months and as a result was kicked out of his home by his family. While living on the streets he decided to ask his family for help and they took him to the Centre. After completing his rehabilitation programme he worked as a leader for the Centre's rehabilitation services for three years and then went on to do outreach work for his church. Despite P6's relapse into drug use upon leaving prison, his experience at the church service while in prison still seemed to facilitate a profound and long-lasting change in him. He noted that at the service he:

**P6:** Became so, I became so soft. I became very soft, you understand. Tears was running down my eyes and, I just couldn't, I just couldn't help, for I couldn't even stop the tears, that came from my eyes. Normally you don't cry in prison. If the guys is gonna see you crying in prison, you gonna be in trouble ... You can't even smile in prison, if you smile they ask you, "are you looking for a man?" They tell you this if you smile in prison, that's why nobody smile in prison. And if you cry you in big trouble as well. But that day ... I couldn't, I couldn't stop any emotions or feelings, or tears, you understand. Because why it just happened, and I can't believe myself either. For the fact that that was me now. I became so like a child, you understand. Soft and things like that.

What is implied in P6's narrative is that as a gangster in prison you need to be devoid of any feeling: If you smile you run the risk of being labelled a "woman" and being molested by another prisoner. If you cry in prison you also run the risk of getting into "trouble". However, the church service enabled P6 to go against this norm and to openly express his feelings. It may be that his prison gang respected this, as it has been argued that the Numbers gang have an inherent respect for religion (Lindegård & Gear, 2014), and thus may be accepting of emotional expression in the context of religion. Being allowed to feel vulnerable

may have been appealing to P6 after having to be stoic for so long while in the gang: “I couldn’t understand ...why I had to...operate like a monster, and be so controlled and evil minded and things like that ... Now today I can, today ... I can truly have a heart for people”

P6 likened crying and showing emotions to being like a child, illustrating that he may see it as a vulnerability or immaturity. Relatedly, P11 suggesting in his story above that I might not see crying as “something big” implies that he may view women being able to cry as normal. Participants like P6 and P11 may therefore have felt more comfortable divulging information to me about their expression of their own feelings because I am a woman. That aside, showing feelings was constructed in P6 and P11’s stories as something that women (and children) tend to do, not men. Men, on the other hand, - particularly men in a gang - are expected to be tough and hard: “the gangsters don’t need sissies [girlyies]. You can’t be a sissies” (P6).

This draws on a particular discourse of hegemonic masculine identity where displays of stoicism, toughness and violence are revered as ideal traits of manhood (Mthembu, 2015). In their study with Cape Flats male adolescents who were awaiting trial, Cooper and Foster (2008) found that one of the ways in which the youngsters performed their hyper-masculinity was to position themselves as stoic and macho men. Relatedly, research shows that crime (in particular violent crime) may provide a means by which this kind of hegemonic masculinity can be enacted (Deuchar & Weide, 2018; Messerschmidt, 1993). A key impediment to reform amongst male offenders is the occupation of this hyper-masculine identity coupled with an unwillingness (or inability) to express feelings and discuss emotional difficulties (Abrams, Anderson-Nathe, & Aguilar, 2008; Deuchar et al., 2016). However, for P6, P11 and P12, after having a religious experience they were brought to tears, thereby going against this notion of stoicism. Similarly, in Brenneman’s (2014) study on gang exit and religious conversion, being able to cry in front of others was an important turning point in the narratives of some former gang members. Likewise in his work on masculinity and recovery from gang life, Flores (2016) noted the importance to recovering gang members of sharing their testimonies in group therapy which sometimes involved openly crying within the group.

P6, P11 and P12’s stories above illustrate a profound change in identity from occupying a hyper-masculine position of toughness or violence to a position of vulnerability where feelings are openly expressed and one can show empathy for others. Religion therefore offered them a new replacement self that was completely separate from their previous gangster identity (Hallett & McCoy, 2015). It may be that these spiritual experiences

provided participants with the resources needed to manage and express their emotions (Giordano et al., 2008), as well as to empathise with others (Harris et al., 2017).

### **5.6.1.1 Tough masculinity**

For some participants in this study the notion of tough or violent masculinity may initially have been appealing when they were gang members. When discussing his gang involvement P2 noted:

**P2:** Then wars came out, wars break out and then, I was always the one who wanted to run in front. Say, “Hey my bru [brother], give the gun, I want to show you what I can do man”. Used to go out and shoot, shoot, shoot, shoot.

When I asked him to elaborate on this he said: “If you are in the front then, they see you clearly as ... you are the one who make steam, you always make steam. ...you get seen by the leaders”. This demonstrates a performative aspect of tough or violent masculinity where P2 wanted to be on the frontline during the gang wars in order to prove his power and strength to his fellow gang members, presumably to gain respect from them. Indeed the adolescents in Cooper and Foster’s (2008) South African study portrayed gangsterism as a means by which reputation and status could be gained through participating in violent and criminal activities (such as shooting guns).

P6 also sought out a sense of power through being in a gang. He noted that his father was not involved in his upbringing after his parents separated and at the age of 16 he joined a gang:

**P6:** So I thought, I thought it was cool for me anyway man. Because why I didn’t have a father, I need a father, I look for a role model, you understand, I didn’t find any role model. So the easy way out for me is, I could see my role model there, because why: they having money, they are having guns, they are having cars, they have authority in so many ways, you understand. I saw them how they bent other gangsters and stuff like that.

Clearly P6 wanted powerful and authoritative men in his life who he could look up to, and his gang was able to give him this, at least for a period of time. However, it may be that the positive side of this feeling of power diminished for P6: one way in which an “emotional

'self' can develop is through the decline of the positive emotions associated with criminal activity (Giordano et al., 2007; Hunter & Farrall, 2017 p. 4). The flipside of feelings of power in the gang is that the expression of emotions and empathy is forbidden, which for participants like P6 eventually became problematic. As noted in his story above: "I couldn't understand ... why I had to ... operate like a monster, and be so controlled and evil minded". Through religion, participants like P6 were given the opportunity to move away from the tough, hardened, violent identity of a gangster, to a softer, more vulnerable identity from which they are able to vocalise their feelings and show empathy for others. Thus, religion offers them a way in which to manage an alternative masculine identity that they did not originally think they wanted – through a focus on love and kindness.

### **5.6.1.2 Emotional transformation**

P10, who did not follow the absolution pathway to desistance but rather the disillusionment pathway, nevertheless also discussed experiencing an emotional change while in prison. As noted in section 5.4 on transformation as a process, P10 remained in the Numbers gang for "protection" but he had a desire to "do right and live right". He elaborated on this decision making process saying:

**P10:** There in prison ... you learn to accept things ... I became, things became much clearer to me, actually. Because I did grow up. I did grow, I became a man, and I'm not a kid anymore. And ... my love for people did grow just more. I'm loving anybody, everybody, different kind of people. Then I just learnt to love people. I didn't wanna see, I didn't wanna see anybody get hurt.

While in prison it seems that P10 became more mature and emotionally aware. At this point in time P10 was already in his early 30s and so his choice of words – "I became a man" - suggests that despite his age, he did not truly feel like a man before this. P10 was sexually abused by two older men when he was approximately 10 years of age and he did not tell anyone about it until he was in recovery for drug addiction many years later. After the abuse he joined a group of friends in school, and later became a gang member. When discussing the abuse with me he said:

**P10:** It made me always felt that time, I need protection over me ... I didn't feel like I'm a man ... But then I make sure that I always have a group around me, I always

will make sure that I belong in a group, that I'm with bigger guys that can love me and protect me, but I must always be in charge

**JK:** You must always be in charge?

**P10:** Uh, always kind of must be in charge. That made me felt better about myself and stuff like that.

This story illustrates P10's feelings of emasculation after the sexual abuse and his subsequent search for love and protection from "bigger guys" in a group. Simultaneously he also wanted to be in a position of authority in the group. Victims of sexual abuse often experience a loss of control over their lives when they have been abused (Paolucci, Genuis, & Violato, 2001). It seems that through being in a gang, P10 was able to regain a sense of control. Firstly, bigger gang members could protect him and ensure that he was not abused again, and secondly, being in a gang not only offered him a sense that he was loved and protected but also an opportunity to occupy a position of leadership, which, as the years progressed, he did. Being a gang member therefore offered P10 a temporary solution to finding a way to be a man safely. However, it was only in prison that he started accepting things and seeing things more clearly that he truly felt like a man and began caring for others.

Even though P10 felt protected, loved, and powerful while in the gang, his story about his experiences in prison suggests that he did not really know how to care for others when he was a gangster. However, while in prison attending the rehabilitation programmes on offer, this changed: He "learnt to love people" and "didn't wanna see anybody get hurt", illustrating that he began to emotionally connect with people and could empathise with them. This change is evident in a story he shared on how he managed anger. He noted that when he was a gang member and became angry: "There's mos<sup>19</sup> nothing that gonna control that thing". However, if he is confronted with a situation that makes him angry now he is better able to regulate his emotions (Giordano et al., 2007): "I will move away ... I realise, say 'hey P10', so I'm not gonna react on it um ... So check 'wag [wait] P10', I talk to myself, I go cool down".

While in the gang the participants appeared to embrace a tough, hardened masculine identity; perhaps because they needed to be tough in order to survive, and/or because it made them feel powerful. However, a religious experience or (in the case of P10) a rehabilitation programme in prison facilitated a profound change in many of them in that they moved away

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<sup>19</sup> Afrikaans slang which roughly translates into "obviously" in this context

from this tough identity towards a more feeling identity in which they were able to empathise and connect emotionally with others as well as manage and express their own feelings - things that they were not able to do while in the gang.

There is little discussion in the gang and crime desistance literature of this particular type of emotional change in former gang members. However, there is increasing recognition in the literature of the emotional aspects of desistance (Hunter & Farrall, 2017). For instance, based on longitudinal data Caverley and Farrall (2011) outline the emotional trajectories followed by desisting offenders. In the first phase of this trajectory, those who desisted expressed happiness at no longer having to endure the negative emotions associated with offending. As they began to put more distance between their present and old, criminal selves, they started to experience a growing sense of disquiet and regret as they reflected on their past criminal lives. Feelings of guilt and shame acted as a mechanism of control when it came to temptations to re-offend. Alongside these negative feelings, personal pride and a sense of achievement for no longer offending and instead adopting more prosocial roles (such as starting a family or establishing a career) also emerged (Caverley & Farrall, 2011).

Giordano et al. (2007) included an emotional dimension in a revision of their theory of cognitive transformation. They argued that criminal offenders, as a result of recurring conflict with loved ones growing up, experience an angry and depressive identity, which, if left unaddressed, can lead to a life of crime: Offenders who begin to participate in more conventional roles with the help of a prosocial intimate partner start to break away from a life of crime through both a cognitive change - in the way in which their criminal lifestyle is understood - and an emotional change - in that they change the way in which anger is understood and managed (Bachman et al., 2016; Giordano et al., 2007). Another way in which negative emotions like anger, depression and low self-esteem can be regulated is through religious beliefs: desisting offenders who become religious can garner strength, support and guidance in understanding and managing difficult emotions through their religious belief system (Harris et al., 2017).

Some of these emotion-related desistance findings are echoed in the current study: Guilt over past gang activities was partly evident in the participants' narratives (see P4, P11 and P12's stories above on p. 110-112), as was a change in their ability to manage difficult emotions (see P10's story on p. 118-119). Further, a sense of pride in their desistance was also present in some stories - for example, P11 spoke about being "so glad" when he realised he could cry. However, the participants' emotional transformation involved more than the emergence of positive emotions and the development of emotional regulation. Their

emotional transformation involved a profound change in how they emotionally connected with others, and expressed their own feelings.

Deuchar et al. (2016) studied young men in Copenhagen attempting to desist from gang-related activities, and found that through the use of a boxing-oriented rehabilitation programme (which the authors call New Start), expressing emotions and vulnerabilities became more acceptable for programme participants. The New Start programme provided a platform from which participants could begin to form alternative male prosocial bonds, as well as construct a positive self-image as strong men while refraining from participating in gang violence. It also offered a therapeutic space in which participants could open up to counsellors about their problems (Deuchar et al., 2016). In South Africa, a study that explored the desistance process of ex-offenders who participated in a rehabilitation programme noted that participants became better able to manage their anger, they could discuss their difficulties with others, and they became sensitive to the feelings, thoughts and experiences of others (Mapham & Hefferon, 2012). This is echoed in the findings of the current study: For some participants, a religious experience functioned as a turning point, enabling them to absolve themselves of and make amends for their past gang life and thereby let go of their gangster identity. Simultaneously, this religious experience (and for others, like P10, attending a rehabilitation programme in prison) also facilitated an emotional change in these participants in that they transformed from hardened, stoic gangsters, to emotionally sensitive and aware individuals.

## **5.7 Embracing a prosocial identity**

Both participants who followed the disillusionment and absolution pathways to desistance shared stories of their occupation of more prosocial roles in their lives after they left their gangs. In their stories they distanced themselves from their past gangster identity while moving towards an alternative, prosocial identity (Berger et al., 2016; Bubolz & Simi, 2015; King, 2013a), including becoming religious and being positive role models to their families and in their communities.

### **5.7.1 Religious identity**

When discussing his religious belief system P3 noted: “I have the Lord in my heart. I see now ... I see now in the light man. I see I am there now man, to take one step at a time to grow man”. Implied in P3’s wording is that previously - as a gangster and drug user - he was

in trouble (darkness or shadow), and having religion in his life has led him into a more positive lifestyle (the light) and enabled him to grow. P5 appeared to find direction through religion:

**P5:** I go to church now more than I go to clubs you know. And that's where I actually found, found my future you know that's where I found my wisdom. That's where I found a way forward in life. How to, how to deal with problems and issues you know that, that was, usually hard for me to deal with you know.

Before P5 became religious (in other words, when he was still in the gang life) he struggled to manage the problems he faced. Religion gave him a framework for dealing with these problems.

Common to P3 and P5's stories is a transformation from a position of darkness (P3) or lack of direction (P5) as gang members, to a position of enlightenment as religious men. In this way P3 and P5 renounced their gangster identity and took on a new, prosocial identity of rehabilitated and religious men (Lau & Stevens, 2012; Pinnock, 2016; Stevens, 2008). Similarly, in her work with marginalised coloured adolescent boys in South Africa, Anderson (2009) notes that religious practices (such as going to church) offered the participants a means by which to renounce the violent gangster masculinity. In Lau and Stevens' (2012) South African study on how men spoke about violent behaviour against their intimate female partners, the authors found that some participants, invoking discourses of conversion and personal insight, re-positioned themselves from "penitent sinner" to "being saved" (Lau & Stevens, 2012, p. 435). In this way they relinquished their identities as abusers and took on identities of rehabilitated men.

International research on religious conversion indicates that while conversion does not appear to produce a noticeable change in a person's personality traits, what it does do is facilitate a profound change in one's personal goals and identity (Maruna et al., 2006; Paloutzian, Richardson, & Rambo, 1999). In Berger et al.'s (2016) study with former gang members, an important factor that helped participants to uphold their decision to desist from gangsterism was adopting new identities by joining prosocial organisations such as faith-based groups. Aligning oneself with spirituality or religion offers a more favourable identity that can replace an identity associated with antisocial behaviours (Giordano et al., 2008). From this new identity the participants in the current study were provided with protective

resources that helped them to mature (P3) and manage their problems (P5; Chen et al., 2012; F.-Dufour & Brassard, 2014; Webb et al., 2017)<sup>20</sup>.

Many of the participants grew up exposed to religion through attending Sunday school or Madrasa<sup>21</sup>, or through their families and immediate community being religious. For instance, P3 noted that as a child “I was every day in Mosque”. Therefore participants like P3 were embracing an identity that was already familiar to them as it was a part of their upbringing. Young people who have connections with religion are considered less likely to pursue gang involvement (McDaniel, 2012). While a religious upbringing did not protect the participants in the current study from becoming involved in a gang as youngsters, it seems that it became a protective resource later in their lives when they desisted from their gangs. It may be that the bonds formed with antisocial peers while growing up overshadowed the positive effects of the participants’ religious upbringing (Giordano et al., 2008). Their involvement in gangs despite their exposure to religion may also reflect Catalano and Hawkins’ (1996) model of social development where an individual can engage in antisocial behaviour despite having prosocial bonds in their life, if the benefits of that behaviour outweigh the costs and thereby serve the individual’s self-interests. The supportive role that religious belief systems can play in the process of desistance will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six.

### **5.7.2 Family man identity**

Along with becoming religious, many participants strove to be positive role models to their families. When discussing his gang involvement P4 noted that he used to think to himself: “When I get married, I don’t want my children to go that route, you see”. Indeed P4 exited the gang life when he converted to Islam and got married. His transformation was partly motivated by his desire to set a good example for his children, and thereby ensure that they would not follow in his footsteps and become gangsters themselves; a finding echoed in other gang desistance research (Chalas & Grekul, 2017). As noted above in section 5.4, P2 also discussed wanting to be a positive role model to his child, which played a role in his leaving gangsterism:

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<sup>20</sup> The supportive role that prosocial identities can play in desistance will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

<sup>21</sup> Madrasa, in this context, refers to a religious school for the study of the Islamic religion.

**P2:** I've got a six year old son who's growing up so, I want to be a mirror for him man, at the end of the day, he can speak good of me. If people ask him, for instance, "how do you know your daddy?" Then he can say "no man my daddy's a good person". That's why I decided to change - for myself, and for my son.

Importantly, this was not the only motivation in P2's transformation, as was the case in other participants' stories too. As discussed in section 5.4, P2 also had a negative experience related to his gang activities which seemed to prompt his already present desire to change his life. This illustrates that a number of factors can play a role in facilitating desistance and, relatedly, identity transformation. Indeed gang members typically experience multiple motivations for wanting to leave the gang (Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Chalas & Grekul, 2017; Roman et al., 2017).

While P12 did not discuss wanting to be a positive role model, he did note that he felt a need to leave behind his gang activities in order to commit his life to caring for his wife and children:

**P12:** I thought no man, I still got a road to walk for my kids man ... Most of the guys they haven't got kids and those that got kids they don't care man. No man I care about my kids. So I'm gonna give my life to my wife and kids and I'm finished with this stuff.

As discussed above, when P12 was released from prison he left the gang life but continued to use drugs for several years until attending a church service with a colleague where he converted to Christianity.

What is common to P2, P4, and P12's stories is that they experienced a change in identity from that of a gangster to that of a committed husband and father who wanted to care for and set a good example for their children. This draws on the notion of the "possible self" (Paternoster et al., 2016, p. 1206). While the "feared self" provides the initial step in the desistance process, in order to maintain this process the individual needs to construct a new and more prosocial idea of who they want to be (Paternoster et al., 2016). For the participants in the current study this involved embracing a family man position. Through being positive role models, P2, P4, and P12 could construct an identity of mature men who need to care for and mentor their families, thereby reinforcing their own sense of transformation (Søgaard et al., 2016).

### **5.7.2.1 Provider and protector identity**

Some participants shared stories of what they wanted to do for their families in the future. For instance, P7 noted:

**P7:** I wanna get married, get a house. Be a provider, protector, protect my family, when they break in, I get them, stuff like that. Wanna be a provider, a protector ... for my family. That is what I wanna be.

This invokes a particular discourse of masculine identity in which men are constructed as financial providers and protectors of their wives and children (Graham, 2014). Clearly this is a goal that P7 aspires to.

Interestingly, the role of provider and protector can also be fulfilled through gang activities. For instance, when P4 was discussing gangsterism he noted: “you see in the gang life, robbery is their job man”. Similarly P6 noted of his gang involvement: “I needed to smuggle all the time ... I have to do my thing, because why, I have so many responsibilities for my family”. Gang activities, such as drug dealing and robbery, offer a source of income that the participants could use to support their families, thereby helping them to live up to their identity of financial provider. South African youngsters living in areas where gangsterism is rife, as well as former gang members themselves, report that one of the main attractions of gangs is the ease of access to financial and material resources, particularly in a context of poverty where fundamental human needs are often not adequately met, or met at all (Daniels & Adams, 2010; Owen & Greeff, 2015; van der Merwe & Swanepoel, 2017; Van Wyk, 2001; Ward & Bakhuis, 2010). In terms of the protector identity, one way in which this can be fulfilled in the gang is through physically protecting gang turf:

**P4:** That time when I did take a tattoo, I must protect this area from the other group not to come over to, to here in my area to, to do what they want to do, you understand

**JK:** Ok. And what, why was it important to you to protect that area?

**P4:** Because why was it important that maybe if they gonna come here they also gonna um, maybe from the laaities [youngsters] here, um, that's one of my smallest reason. Then from the laaitie can get part of him. And from the women folk also.

They come over to scratch the women ... And I was, I was very protective then man. Because my concerns for them you see, that was why.

In P4's story women and children are positioned as vulnerable and in need of protection while male gang members like P4 are positioned as powerful protectors who can prevent them from coming to harm. While the identity of provider and protector can be achieved through drug smuggling, robbery, and physically protecting gang turf; a more conventional means of fulfilling it is through getting married and buying and securing a home, as illustrated in P7's story above. P1, like P7, also had a goal for the future - he wanted to find permanent employment: "I'm wanting to, look for um, achieve something man, big enough man ... I just wanna have ... proper work for me". He also noted:

**P1:** I wanna, one day, I don't wanna take my children raise up here in this place. Because I don't wanna say it's a bad place, coz this is my home, I can't talk so about it. But it's not a good state of life for my kids. Ja, lot of gangsterism.

Not only does P1 want to provide for his family, he also wants to raise them in a community in which they are not exposed to gangsterism, illustrating his concern for their emotional and physical well-being and development and his interest - similar to P7 above - in protecting them from harm. While these are noble ambitions, the context within which the participants reside may not allow them to achieve these ambitions, given the high levels of unemployment and violent crime in areas like the study community (Petrus, 2013). While this will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six, it is important to note that not being able to fulfil the role of provider and protector is likely to contribute to feelings of emasculation (Søgaard et al., 2016).

### **5.7.3 Being a positive role model in the community**

Other participants expressed a desire to set a positive example for their communities. A lack of prosocial role models was a common theme in the participants' stories: "Our youngsters are looking up to gangsters. Because, being a gangster is the in thing in today's life. If you not a gangster you don't get seen" (P8). This could reflect perceptions of coloured masculine identity that are stereotypically associated with gangsterism, criminality and violence (Petrus, 2013; Samara, 2011). Historically, the coloured identity has been marginalised and trivialised, and as a result the "search for identity" (Petrus, 2013, p. 76) amongst many coloured people is largely unresolved. One way in which a sense of identity

can possibly be achieved – in particular masculine identity - is through involvement in gangs (Jensen, 2008; Petrus, 2013). P5 alluded to this:

**P5:** For us is raised you know, especially the young, the youngsters if you are coloured ... in my place and, you know if you are coloured you must go to jail to be a man. You know, that's, that's how we grow up in the ghettos you know. The big boys they making the things, everything they say, you must go to prison to be a man, you know the white people to be a man you must go to the army you know. The black guys, the black youngsters they must go to the bush to be a man, so we as coloureds we need to, we must go to jail.

In this extract going to jail (and by implication, committing a crime) is illustrated as an inevitable rite of passage for coloured youngsters – passed down from one generation to the next - that coloured young men need to go through in order to prove their worth as men. Being a criminal or being violent as a man can be one way in which to prove one's masculine identity – particularly in marginalised communities like the Cape Flats (where many coloured people reside) where there are not many alternative means of gaining respect (Cooper & Foster, 2008; Messerschmidt, 2012; Standing, 2006). What is also interesting is P5's comparison between the different race groups: the identity transition between adolescence and adulthood for white and black young South African men (by going to the army<sup>22</sup> and going to the bush<sup>23</sup>, respectively) are generally afforded a higher status, while going to jail (which P5 sees as the identity transition for coloured young men) is usually associated delinquency and failure. Despite this, however, there is a different kind of status associated with being a criminal or gang member. Elsewhere in his interview P5 noted:

**P5:** For us here you know, there's no role models. The only role models for us is gangsters. You know, if you see this gangster live in such a big house you know, he's driving big cars you know. They become the role models for guns, for women, they

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<sup>22</sup> Between 1957 and 1993, white men between the ages of 17 and 65 years were conscripted to serve nine months to one year in the South African Defence Force. Conscripts were required to fight against liberation movements in Angola, Namibia and Mozambique, and were regularly deployed to townships to suppress anti-apartheid activities (South African History Online, 2017)).

<sup>23</sup> According to the Xhosa culture in South Africa, adolescent boys are expected to go through a ritual to transform them from boys into men. The ritual begins by excluding the boy from his immediate surroundings by sending him to a temporary hut built of grass. At this hut he is circumcised and receives instructions on courtship, sexual education, marriage practices and social and adult responsibilities (Magodyo, Andipatin, & Jackson, 2016)

have everything. ... for us you know, growing up here in Cape Flats here it's not very easy because we don't have role models, we don't have guys to look up to.

Being a gangster is something that coloured youngsters in the Cape Flats strive for as it is associated with living in big houses, driving big cars, using guns, and having access to women - all typically masculine symbols of status, power, and success (Owen & Greeff, 2015; Ward & Bakhuis, 2010). The participants, however, wanted to set a different example for youngsters in their communities, and prove to them that being a gangster is not the only option, and thereby not the only way in which to achieve a sense of identity as a coloured man. For instance, P6 discussed outreach work he did with youth engaged in drugs and crime:

**P6:** I must be a role model, I must be an example. I must be the one who was talking to them. I must be the one that will show them through my lifestyle that change is possible you understand. So I have to, I have to show them in many ways, I have to, I needed to prove to them that change is possible, it can come from anybody.

In his story P6 positions himself as someone who is obligated to inspire others to change their lives by demonstrating to them through his own transformed lifestyle that “change is possible”. When reflecting on his decision to exit his gang, P8 also discussed the change he felt in himself: “I decided no, that I won’t go back to the way I used to be, understand, because I’m a changed man. People respect me, children look up to me, you understand”. Presumably having others look up to and love him is not what P8 experienced as a gang member, or if he did, then it likely took a very different form - it may have involved having others look up to him because of the material things he had access to as a gang member. As a “changed man” however, P8, similar to P6, is now able to set a more positive example for others. P5, who was studying film and media at the time of being interviewed and aspired to become a musician, felt that he could be a role model to young people through his music:

**P5:** Through music you can inspire so much, I mean there’s a lot of guys, youngsters that is lost in this world you know. Especially in Cape Town, in South Africa, you know they lost, they don’t know what to do with their life you know. Then just for me to step in and using ...this element of, of rap you know. Use it as, to spread the word

to inspire other rappers you know, inspire the youngsters. Because every day I say it, even in college, I just want to be a story of hope through my music, for somebody else, somebody that is not in prison but is at home, you know is caught up in this nightmare but he doesn't know how to get out. For him to look at me, see me on TV and all this, wherever he's gonna read about me, see me, he will ask himself how do I get there? And so he can get inspired as well.

It is clear that P5 felt his story could inspire others to change their lives. He viewed his ability to turn his life around as motivating other youth "caught up in this nightmare" to change their lives too. Common to P5, P6, and P8's stories is a desire to show youngsters that leaving gang involvement - or not joining a gang in the first place - is a possibility. They want to prove to them through their own reformed behaviour that there is an alternative path to follow, one that may include becoming religious or getting an education. This draws partly on Densley and Pyrooz's (2017) signalling theory of gang disengagement where an individual conveys to others through their actions and behaviour that they have exited the gang life. In the case of P5, P6 and P8 they are signalling or conveying to youngsters through their reformed lifestyles that they have truly changed their lives.

Other participants discussed being a positive role model in relation to giving back to their communities through the work they did. As discussed above in section 5.6, participants like P4, P11 and P12 were actively involved in community work, with P4 and P12 working as violence interrupters (mediating gang violence) and P11 doing outreach work with high school youth. As P12 noted: "This job I give back into the community what I took out of the community years before, when I was still a active gang member". Giving back in this way may help participants like P4, P11 and P12 to reconcile with society for their past crimes, as well as overcome the negative label and stigma often associated with antisocial activities (LeBel, Richie, & Maruna, 2015). It may also serve to reinforce their own sense of reform through giving them a sense of responsibility (Søgaard et al., 2016), which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six.

In their stories the participants constructed themselves as embracing a prosocial identity where they became religious; cared, provided for and protected their families; and set a positive example within their communities through showing others that they had changed, and through giving back.

## 5.8 Chapter summary

This chapter has focused on the participants' stories of identity transformation, shedding light on their move from a gangster identity to a prosocial identity. It has shown that this transformation was a process involving various turning points. For some participants, reservations over their gang involvement or an intention to change their lives was present for some time before the actual event of leaving their gangs took place. Relatedly, this process sometimes involved movement or fluidity between a gangster and a more prosocial identity, before the decision to exit gangsterism was finally cemented, usually as a result of key turning points or push/pull factors (for instance, the fear of incarceration and/or embracing the fatherhood identity).

For many participants, their identity transformation focused on stories of disillusionment with the support and brotherhood gang membership purported to offer, which was usually brought on by a negative gang-related experience. This disillusionment, coupled with a fear of what may become of them if they were to stay in the gang life, prompted many participants to let go of their gangster identity and ultimately make the decision to exit the gang life. This decision-making process was also often informed by another turning point: the embracing of a fatherhood identity. Some other participants' stories focused on absolution: religious experiences or encounters functioned as turning points that allowed these participants to absolve themselves of past crimes and embrace a new identity from which they could make amends for their past, as well as express and manage their emotions and empathise with others. Both participants who followed the disillusionment and absolution pathways of identity transformation shared stories of the prosocial identities they turned towards, including becoming religious men and positive role models to their families and in their communities. Thus, they aligned themselves with more favourable identities from which they could set a positive example to others through being religious, caring for others, demonstrating their changed behaviour and through giving back to their communities.

In the following chapter I turn to the participants' stories of leaving the gang and maintaining reform once they had left the gang (and the challenges associated with these processes), focusing on the participants' personal agency, responsibility and independence; social support mechanisms, and prosocial identities and how these supported their desistance.

## CHAPTER SIX: LEAVING THE GANG AND MAINTAINING REFORM

### 6.1 Introduction

As discussed in the preceding chapter, I argue that the process of desistance involves both an identity transformation (the focus of the previous chapter) as well as protective resources (both within the individual and the environment) and the occupation of prosocial identities that support and maintain desistance (the focus of the current chapter). I draw on Shadd Maruna's understanding of desistance: he proposed that desistance should be defined as a process of maintaining a crime-free lifestyle in spite of the obstacles and challenges that life presents (Maruna, 2001). Thus, I argue that the notion of a process of desistance should not only be applied to leaving the gang, but also maintaining a prosocial lifestyle *after* disengagement, that does not involve gang-related activities.

Accordingly, in this chapter I focus not only on the participants' stories of leaving the gang, but also on maintaining their reform after having left the gang. In my discussion of these stories I explore the protective resources (agency, responsibility and independence, as well as social and religious support) and prosocial identities (caring for one's family and giving back to and being leaders in the community) that supported the participants in their process of desistance.

Before turning to these findings, I elucidate the resilience and interactional theories that provide a framework for this chapter.

### 6.2 Resilience and interactional theoretical frameworks

Resilience is defined as positive or successful adaptation in the context of severe adversity or risk (Masten, 2001, 2014). While it is often conceptualised as applying to individuals who have never succumbed to risk factors (Murray, 2010), it has also been applied more broadly to include those who successfully adapt *after* a period of maladaptation or developmental difficulty (Albert, 2008; Carr & Vandiver, 2001; Fougere & Daffern, 2011; Kelly & Ward, 2012; Roisman, 2005; Stubbs, 2014; Todis et al., 2001). This study is in line with the second conceptualisation of resilience: I acknowledge that resilience can (and should) usefully be applied to individuals at risk for joining a gang but who do not, but here I focus on how it can also be applied to those who do join a gang but later desist. Leaving the gang and staying away from the gang can be associated with a number of risks and challenges that the participants in this study were able to overcome in their process of desistance. As Berger et al. (2016) note in their study on gang desistance, committing to the decision to cease gang-related activities and adopt a normative lifestyle is a difficult process. This is a

key reason why I have chosen to use a resilience lens in my conceptualisation of the participants' desistance in this chapter: while desistance focuses on the leaving of the gang (or a life of crime) and maintenance of reform, resilience has a much wider application (Fitzpatrick, 2011) in that it can encompass not only exiting gangsterism and maintaining reform, but also managing and overcoming the challenges and risks associated with these processes, including, for example, the loss of a social network and a source of income. These risks and challenges will be discussed in more detail in section 6.3 below. In my understanding of resilience (and thus, desistance) in this chapter, I use an interactional framework, cognizant of Thornberry's (1987) interactional theory of delinquency which recognises that an individual's behaviour is best understood as a result of social interactions between that individual and other people, as well as institutions (Thornberry, 1987). There is a growing recognition that both the processes of resilience and desistance involve an interaction between human agency and the socio-cultural context of an individual (Farrall et al., 2010; King, 2013b; Paternoster et al., 2016; Ungar, 2008). Protective resources, such as access to social support and education, as well life events, like marriage and employment, facilitate these processes. However, the individual has agency in this process in that he/she needs to actively draw on the available resources and experience these resources and possible life events as meaningful and desirable, in order for resilience or desistance to unfold (King, 2013b; Liebregts et al., 2015; Rumbay, 2004; Søgaard et al., 2016; Theron & Theron, 2010; Ungar, 2008; Ungar et al., 2013).

In my approach to this interactional process, I draw on the work of Farrall et al. (2011), Healy (2014), King (2013b) and Ungar (2008, 2012), arguing that agency is not something which people possess, but something that is achieved through the dynamic interaction between an individual and his/her social world "that is directed towards the achievement of a meaningful and credible new self" (Healy, 2014, p. 874; King, 2013b). Critically, this process is not only an "inner journey" (Healy, 2014, p. 874), but is also shaped by the wider social context of the individual, which determines the availability of new prosocial identities the desister can take up, and protective resources he/she can draw on (Chen et al., 2012; Farrall et al., 2011; Healy, 2014; Ungar, 2008). Thus, while individual agency is a key component of the resilience process, it is the role of the individual's socio-ecological context - families, communities and governments - to ensure that these resources are available in culturally meaningful ways that reflect the preferences of those who need them (Ungar, 2012).

Therefore, in this chapter I argue that the process of desistance, viewed through a resilience lens and drawing on interactional theory, involves (i) an interaction between the individual and his/her environment and (ii) not only the act of leaving the gang and maintaining reform, but also managing and overcoming the challenges and risks associated with these processes. These risks and challenges faced by the participants will be explored in more detail in the following section. Thereafter I explain how I conceptualise the positive adaptation of the participants, following which I turn to the role of agency, personal responsibility and independence, social support mechanisms and prosocial identities in supporting the participants' desistance (including the leaving of their gang, maintaining reform, and the difficulties associated with these processes).

### **6.3 Risks and challenges associated with leaving and staying away from the gang**

One of the risks associated with gang desistance is that of violent victimisation. International literature suggests that while for most gangsters the method of leaving the gang is non-hostile and passive (Bolden, 2013; Carson et al., 2013; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011), there is a risk that a member who leaves will experience violence at the hands of rival gangs or the police (Decker et al., 2014). For instance, in Decker et al.'s (2014) study, one third of former gang members reported being continuously attacked by rival gangs, and three quarters experienced gang-related police harassment. In the current study several participants discussed the risk of violence associated with leaving the gang life. P6 said:

**P6:** In the gangsterism you can't pull out ... Because why, there's rules and regulations. If you pull out, there's consequences ... Because why, you are one of us now, you are wearing our tattoo in your blood, so if you wanna pull out, we will come take our blood. That is how it work.

Similarly, P1 said: "You can't sommer [simply] just leave a gang, you'll die. So I was a little bit nervous man". However, most individuals who do manage successfully to desist from gangsterism do so without experiencing violence (Bolden, 2013; Carson et al., 2013; Decker & Pyrooz, 2011). Indeed this was the case for the majority of the participants in this study. Two participants - P1 and P7 - did experience violence, though not at the hands of their previous gang, but a rival gang: P1 was beaten up and P7 was stabbed – both by rival gangs. While P8 did not directly experience violence, he was threatened: "Because many time, I been threatened also many times, here with my life". Thus, even after leaving the

gang, other rival gangs may not be aware of an individual's former gang status, and thus the risk of violent altercations can persist.

Furthermore, once out of the gang, current gang members may continue to keep a close eye on the person who has desisted - "the guys will monitor you for a very long time" (P12). They do this in order to ensure that the person has indeed made a real change in their life (Brenneman, 2014), as opposed to joining another gang, becoming an informant for the police, or joining an organisation such as a neighbourhood watch that may be affiliated with the police - all things which P9 discussed in his interview. He noted that if a person desisted to do any of these things, this would be considered the "wrong decision". The implication is that the gang will not condone this method of exit and may retaliate with violence. As P6 noted above: "if you wanna pull out, we will come take our blood". This kind of gang lore is likely to result in gang members feeling fearful of leaving, given the violence they may have to endure. The participants, however, were able to overcome this fear and exit the gang life.

Another challenge associated with leaving the gang - and with desistance more generally - is that it can result in the loss of a social network, and thus feelings of isolation and loneliness (Berger et al., 2016; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). Former gang members in Daniels and Adams (2010) study were alienated by their communities as a result of their past criminal and violent activities. While participants in the current study did not discuss this kind of alienation, some of them did discuss a loss of friends: "It's bor[ing] here, it's very, very bor[ing] for me, coz I don't have friends anymore" (P2). Similarly, desisting gang members in other research note the difficulty in leaving their gang, as their fellow gang members offered social support and in some cases became a substitute family (Mandel, 2006; Moloney et al., 2009). Both international and South African research attests to the belonging and support the gang life can offer its members (Alleyne & Wood, 2010; Anderson, 2009; Burnett, 1999; Daniels & Adams, 2010; Moloney et al., 2009; Owen & Greeff, 2015; van der Merwe & Swanepoel, 2017; Van Wyk, 2001; Wijnberg & Green, 2014).

Related to this loss of a social network, individuals who have exited the gang life may feel peer pressure to re-join. For instance, P2 discussed old friends from the gang he was a member of approaching him: "I got many friends that showed me "yoh, here's the drugs again, here's the gun, you know how to do your thing". Thus, desisted gang members may feel enticed into re-joining the gang, particularly if they retain social and emotional ties with members (Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Decker et al., 2014; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Retaining these ties may present desisted gang members with opportunities in which they are tempted to relapse into gangsterism if they feel a strong commitment to

back up their gang brothers in times of need (Søgaard et al., 2016). For instance, several months after exiting the gang life P8 learnt that his uncle (who had been in his gang) had been shot and killed by a rival gang. P8 was tempted to avenge his death and even arranged to retaliate against this rival gang, but at the last minute he changed his mind. Thus, another challenge in the desistance process is having to overcome these kind of temptations (which, as will be illustrated in the sections below, the participants were able to do).

Another challenge that may be particularly difficult to manage for former gang members who abused drugs (which was the case for nine out of the twelve participants in the current study) is the risk of relapse. Indeed it is likely that the desistance process is more complex for drug-using offenders in comparison with non-drug-using offenders given that drug use can be a risk and confounding factor in the desistance process (Van Roeyen, Anderson, Vanderplasschen, Colman, & Vander Laenen, 2016). In the current study P2 noted: “Sometimes the temptation come up, going again to drugs”. Several participants relapsed into using drugs – or continued using drugs - after having exited their gangs but were able to overcome this, which will be discussed in more detail in later sections. While the question of why these participants continued or relapsed into drug use was not directly addressed in this thesis, what this continuation of or relapse into drugs use highlights is that desistance, including desistance from substance abuse, does not always follow a linear path and that individuals “drift back and forth, increasing or decreasing...offending along the way” (Carlsson, 2012, p. 4; Maruna, 2001).

A further challenge that desisting gang members may face after exiting the gang life is a loss of status and source of income. As P6 noted:

**P6:** To let go of that, it's gonna be very difficult also because why some of them it, it almost feel like they are losing a baby... because they are carrying power wherever they go, you understand. So that is the only thing that can, makes them survive ... you can survive there with money, cars, whatever.

P6’s comparison of exiting the gang life to the loss of a baby implies that the gang is something that is nurtured and cared for, and ultimately provides love. This, along with the means of survival and sense of status the gang can offer (Cooper & Foster, 2008), can make leaving all the more difficult, as well as re-joining the gang an enticing option. As Daniels and Adams (2010) note: “The seduction of easy money through gangsterism is a constant threat” (p. 53). Indeed finding a legitimate form of employment can be difficult given the

criminal record that many former gang members are likely to have, and also given the stigma attached to being a former gang member (Cooper & Ward, 2012; Deuchar et al., 2016; Jain et al., 2014; Søgaard et al., 2016).

Importantly, the participants in this study were able to navigate and overcome these various difficulties and risks (*how* they did this will be elucidated on in more detail in the sections that follow) and therefore can be considered to have adapted well. This positive adaptation is the focus of the following section.

#### **6.4 Positive adaptation**

In the resilience literature there is some controversy as to how positive adaptation should be defined (Drapeau et al., 2007): Some emphasize that an individual should present with an absence of psychopathology or a low level of impairment in order to be considered resilient, while others - in particular developmental investigators - argue that a resilient individual must meet a particular society's expectations, given his/her age and situation. Others have included both sets of criteria (Masten, 2001, 2014). The choice of which definition to follow involves a value judgement that is influenced by the sociocultural and historical context, as well as the particular focus of a research study (Masten, 2014). A related issue is whether external adaptation criteria (for instance, academic competence or the absence of antisocial behaviour) or internal adaptation criteria (such as well-being or limited levels of distress), or both, should be used when it comes to assessing positive adaptation (Masten, 2001).

In my definition of positive adaptation in the current study, I draw on societal expectations and norms when it comes to disordered and prosocial behaviour, current resilience literature, as well as my participants' own understanding of their lives as presented in their stories. I acknowledge that this definition makes a particular value judgement that is informed by my research aims and the sociocultural and historical context within which this study falls.

I argue that the participants' positive adaptation comprises of the following factors:

- They no longer use drugs, nor do they engage in gang or crime-related activities, illustrating an absence of disordered behaviour (Masten, 2001, 2014).
- They are all actively involved in religious institutions and nine of them are engaged in meaningful romantic relationships - spirituality and positive

relationships have been identified as indicators of “doing well” across various cultures (Drapeau et al., 2007; Ungar, 2008).

- Seven of them have full-time employment, while the other five either work part-time, are actively looking for work and/or are furthering their education, illustrating a conformity to societal expectations (Masten, 2001, 2014).
- They have satisfying and fulfilling lives - For instance, P4 said: “I’m very happy to be here in [the gang intervention programme] ... and I’m very happy I did change my life”
- They have positive goals for their futures. For example, P6 discussed wanting to be more “independent” and “stand on my own two legs”, by moving out of his mother’s house and renting his own property. P9 wanted to further his studies to help him in his work as an outreach worker and facilitator: “my goal now is that I need to get certificates and qualifications for this work that I need to do”.

Arguably, the above demonstrates the participants’ resilience: they successfully desisted from gangsterism and adapted positively in the context of various risks and challenges related to leaving the gang and, perhaps more importantly, staying out of the gang and maintaining their reform.

While the focus in this study is on the participants’ resilience pathway in desisting from gang involvement, I am also cognisant of the fact that their *joining* of the gang may represent a form of hidden or atypical resilience. I briefly address this in the following section.

#### **6.4.1 Hidden resilience**

Hidden or atypical resilience refers to behaviours or patterns of living that may not conform to traditional psychological theories of behaviour that are considered socially appropriate – and that may even be deemed problematic or antisocial by society at large - but that nonetheless encourage young people to overcome adversity or hardship (Hurley et al., 2013; Malindi & Theron, 2010; Ungar, 2004b). For instance, young people who are marginalised and have little or no access to protective resources in their environment that can promote their well-being may actively seek out alternative means by which to enhance their well-being (thereby demonstrating agency). For instance, they may use truancy, violence, fighting or criminal activities as a means of resistance to being labelled a criminal, for survival, to create safe spaces for themselves, to achieve success, to be respected by and

create relationships with their peers and to find a sense of belonging (Bottrell, 2009; Hine & Welford, 2012; Munford & Sanders, 2008; Rios, 2012; Ungar, 2004b, 2011). When it comes to gangsterism, youth may become involved with gangs because the gang can offer safety as well as social and economic adaption to community poverty or a hostile environment (Fleisher, 2009; Solis, 2003; Ungar, 2004b; Wijnberg & Green, 2014). Thus, it is important to note that while desistance from gang involvement can be seen as a conventional form of resilience, joining a gang may be considered atypical or hidden resilience, particularly in a context of limited protective resources.

In the current study, the stories shared by some of the participants indicated that their involvement in gangsterism may have represented a form of hidden resilience. For example, as discussed in Chapter Five, joining and being in a gang seemed to provide the participants with a sense of belonging. P7 discussed how his father was absent from his life growing up:

**P7:** It was hard, tough, sometimes I cried at school, didn't understand why I was born, stuff like that. Confusing. So, ja, grew up as a teenager. I, when I was turning 14/15, I decided I was gonna join a gang because I didn't know where I belong, what is my purpose really.

The gang likely initially fulfilled P7's need for a father figure, love and purpose for a period of time. This may have been the same for P1 who noted that when he was in his gang his fellow members: "give me the love my mother and my father didn't give me". This illustrates that becoming a gang member could be a way of coping with adversity. For P1 this adversity involved not feeling loved by his parents and for P7 it was the absence of his father in his life. They may have become gang members in order to manage the hurt associated with these adverse experiences. Arguably, this could be an example of hidden resilience: Joining and being in the gang may have provided them with the resources to manage or adapt to difficult circumstances for a period of time. However, over time participants like P1 and P7 became disillusioned with this sense of belonging the gang, realising it was not real or it did not resonate with them anymore (as discussed in the previous chapter), which (among other things) prompted their decision to leave the gang life. In desisting from the gang, they demonstrated a more conventional form of resilience, which will be discussed in the sections that follow where I explore the participants' stories of *how* they desisted from the gang life (which includes both the act of leaving the gang and maintaining reform after having left)

and, relatedly, managed to overcome the difficulties associated with this process. I begin with a discussion of the role of agency in their desistance.

## 6.5 Agency

As noted above, my conceptualisation of agency is informed by the work of Farrall et al. (2011), Healy (2014), King (2013b), and Ungar (2008, 2012), who argue that agency is not something possessed by people, but rather something that is achieved through the dynamic interaction between an individual and his/her social world “that is directed towards the achievement of a meaningful and credible new self” (Healy, 2014, p. 874; King, 2013b). According to King (2013b), agency is comprised of:

- Purposive intention
- The ability to develop strategies that are necessary for change.
- The ability to envision and construct a new identity

My understanding of agency is in line with this definition.

Agency was a key aspect of many of the participants’ stories of desistance as they developed a purposeful intention or desire to change their lives, developed strategies that supported them in their desistance, and envisioned and constructed a new, more prosocial identity for themselves, (King, 2013b; Paternoster et al., 2016). Below, I elaborate on the participants’ purposeful intention to change, looking also at the role personal responsibility and independence plays in their desistance. In the sections that follow this one (social and religious support) I explore the strategies that supported the participants’ desistance and how these strategies were actively drawn on, and in the final two sections, I examine the participants’ occupation of new identities that supported their desistance namely, that of actively involved family men and community members.

The limited desistance-related research that has drawn on resilience theory demonstrates that personal agency may be key to successfully disengaging from crime and gangsterism. For instance, youth offenders in Todis et al.’s (2001) study who successfully desisted from crime formed a conscious decision to change their lives, and also had a goal or vision for their futures. Similarly, Stubbs (2014) described the former criminal offenders in her study as being “proactive agents” (p. 104) in their desistance, enlisting services (such as anger management courses) that they required in their process of leaving crime. Former gang members in Albert’s (2008)’s study on gang desistance (which drew on resilience theory) discussed having a clear sense of purpose for committing to their desistance, accepting full

responsibility for their past actions as gang members and taking responsibility for their current progress.

In the gang desistance literature more generally, there is some recognition of the role personal agency plays in desistance. For example, Deane et al. (2007) noted that former gang members in their study actively considered ways in which they could pursue a life path that did not involve gang-related activities, while participants from Berger et al. (2016) and Gormally's (2014) studies discussed weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of being a gang member when embarking on their process of desistance. Former gang members from Søgaard et al.'s (2016) study developed a "new found clarity and a growing degree of agency and control over [their] life-course" (p. 9), discussing values and ideals like responsibility, self-control, independence and determinedness when discussing their process of desistance. These findings are largely echoed in the current study: the participants formed a purposive intention to change their lives, they took personal responsibility for their past and strove for more independence, and they actively drew on support mechanisms within their environment in their process of desistance, all of which will be discussed in the sections that follow.

As discussed in section 5.4, oftentimes the participants' intention to change was precipitated by a negative experience. When P2 was facing possible jail time for possession of ammunition and was beaten up by the police: "This is then when I decided no man, enough is enough". And (while in jail) when P8 began to imagine what path his life might take if he remained in his gang, wondering whether he would become disabled or even die, he "start telling myself no, this is where it all changes". Common to the participants' stories is that not only did they experience particular events that prompted them to reflect on their lives, they recognised and valued these experiences enough to form a strong intention to leave gangsterism (Rumgay, 2004). Their stories also illustrate the ability to take control over their lives and futures (King, 2013a; Maruna, 2001). When it comes to desistance, individuals who are able to leave and stay away from delinquent activities are arguably those who "have acquired the sense that they have at least some choice and some amount of power that enables them to make a difference in their lives" (Liem & Richardson, 2014, p. 707).

For many of the participants, this sense of control and choice may partly reflect one of the main slogans of the Centre - "change is possible" - which was stated in a number of the interviews. Similarly, in a study on gang exit and conversion in Central America, former gang members affiliated with an Evangelical-Pentecostal ministry seemed to embrace the "no one is beyond hope" message associated with the ministry (Brenneman, 2014, p. 118). In terms of the current study, many of the staff members at the Centre are former gang members

and drug addicts and therefore embody this slogan - they are the physical proof that it is possible to leave behind a life of crime, gangsterism and substance use (personal communication, C. Engel, May 2017).

When faced with challenges after having left their gangs, the participants' personal commitment to change persisted. For instance, P1 had relapsed into using drugs at the time of our first interview (but was clean of drugs by the second interview several months later). He was quick to note, however, that despite his relapse he would not go down the path of gangsterism again: "When I made my mind up, I made my mind up, never to walk that way again". Similarly, P8 discussed his commitment to not revert to his "old ways". A few months after he had been released from prison his uncle (who had been in the gang with him and with whom he had been close) was killed and P8 had a desire to avenge his death by retaliating against the gang who killed him, perhaps reflecting persisting social and emotional ties to his gang (Decker et al., 2014). However, when he and other gang members were about to go into the house where the rival gang were he changed his mind: "So we were in the car. Then it just came to me no man. That you can take how many lives, but his life, he won't come back. So it's gonna be stupidness, foolishness to go kill other people".

Although losing his uncle almost lured P8 back into gang-related activities, he resisted and remained committed to maintaining his changed lifestyle. Elsewhere in his interview he noted: "Most people when they come out of prison, they change like, for the first three to four months, and then they back to their old ways, you understand. And I'm like no, I'm gonna hold steadfast". Thus, participants like P1 and P8 were able to manage and overcome these challenges in their lives, arguably demonstrating resilience.

### **6.5.1 The role of agency in joining the gang**

While agency was prominent in the participants' stories of leaving the gang and maintaining reform, when it came to *joining* a gang, some constructed themselves as having little power over their actions - a finding common in other desistance research (King, 2013a; Søgaard et al., 2016). When P5 was a teenager his older gang-involved brothers were killed as a result of gang violence: "And after that I said to myself, I have nothing anymore in life you know, I got nothing to lose. That's when I joined the gangsters ... I had no choice and that's when I start to join the gangsters"

P5's narrative implies that he felt forced into joining a gang given the loss of his brothers, and perhaps a resultant loss of purpose. For other participants, these feelings of powerlessness when it came to becoming or being a gang member were linked to drug use

and abuse. Some noted that using drugs contributed to a change in their disposition: “And, ja drugs, bring out another person, you understand. Coz now you not scared of anything. You don’t worry, you don’t care, you just do what you want, understand, without thinking about the consequences” (P8). When discussing his drug use, P6 noted that it led him into a “different environment”. When I asked what he meant by this he responded:

**P6:** It changes the way you think, the drug. And it has the ability to change a person’s behaviour, you understand. Which means you are not your original self anymore - your mind changes, your behaviour changes. When that changes you’re turning into somebody else, automatically. And with that it’s easy for you to adapt to the wrong thing, and wrong people, and wrong places ...That’s why I say drugs change into gangsterism...You start to get involved in crimes even though you small. You steal for that drug. And then you do crime. And the way the drug control you man, your mind is working in that stage already.

Similar to P8, P6 feels that using drugs fundamentally changes who you are, resulting in committing criminal activities, usually in order to support the drug habit. In these stories drugs are constructed as being in control over the participants’ actions and behaviour which suggests they felt powerless when it came to committing criminal or gang-related activities, and thus did not feel a sense of agency over their actions (King, 2013a). Importantly, the point of highlighting the lack of power or control some participants felt when it came to joining a gang or being a gang member is not to discount the pivotal role an individual’s environment plays when it comes to gang involvement. Indeed factors like drug use and experiencing traumatic events play a role in gang joining (Cooper & Ward, 2012; Raby & Jones, 2016).

Interestingly, there were also cases where participants portrayed themselves as having agency and control over joining gangs. While P6 went into great detail explaining the link between drugs and gangsterism (as seen above), it seems he did not feel this applied directly to him. When talking about gangsters recruiting members he said:

**P6:** Slowly but surely, they pull you in. They are doing it sly, you understand. They, if you druggie, they give you drugs, in the beginning.

**JK:** Is that what happened to you?

**P6:** Not actually. Not actually. I chose that life.

Similarly, P11 noted: “Some people is being forced into gangsterism, I wasn’t forced into gangsterism”. Importantly, though, “choosing” to join a gang needs to be understood in a context where youngsters are presented with a limited set of choices. In poverty-stricken and high violence areas like the Cape Flats (where the participants resided) youth may well join gangs as a literal means of survival, in that the gang offers them protection and a source of income (Daniels & Adams, 2010; Owen & Greeff, 2015). That aside, it is still important to consider why in some instances participants constructed themselves as having limited agency when it came to joining the gang, while in other cases they constructed themselves as having control and choice over this decision.

With regards to the participants’ stories of limited agency over gang joining, these may illustrate their desire to convince others (and perhaps themselves) that being a gang member was not who they ever truly were. In his research with offenders, Maruna (2001) found that those who successfully desisted from crime portrayed their offending as something which did not reflect who they truly were (Liem & Richardson, 2014), which may have been the case with those participants in this study who discussed their limited agency in joining the gang. On the other hand, constructions of agency in the participants’ stories of joining a gang may reflect their desire to take personal responsibility for their actions, which will be the focus of the following section.

### **6.5.2 Personal responsibility and independence**

Personal responsibility-taking was common to many of the participants’ narratives. Similarly, in Albert’s (2008) study with Latino former gang members, participants took full responsibility for their past gang activities and for their current progress.

When P2 went to his family to tell them he was going to leave his gang and stop using drugs he said to them: “I don’t want you guys to help me. I don’t want you guys to help me, I will help me on my own self”. This is not to say, however, that social support is not important in the process of desistance. As will be illustrated in the sections below, it is a key element. But what the excerpt above emphasizes is that P2 wanted to prove to others that he was capable of making a change in his life, without any assistance (King, 2013a). Relatedly, P9 felt that while there were a number of people who supported him in his process of leaving the gang and stopping drugs, when it came to making the decision to change, this was an independent, unsupported choice: “There’s lots of people that played roles in my recovery, but to make a decision there was no one. There was just me, myself and I”.

P5 discussed a change he experienced in how he interpreted his past, in particular his gang involvement. Initially, he placed a lot of responsibility on his father, and also felt that he “had no choice” in joining the gang after the death of his brothers. Over time, however, he began to look inwards and take personal responsibility for his actions:

**P5:** I used to blame my father while I was in jail. You know it's because of him that I'm behind bars, it's because of him that my brothers is dead, it's because of him that we gangsters, it's because of him we living this bad life and all that. But it came so far where I said to myself: I'm tired of blaming people. You know it's time to blame myself. It's time to look in my own faults that I do, my own mistakes, my own roles. It's time for me to rectify it.

**JK:** Ok, so you kind of felt like you wanted to start taking responsibility for your own life?

**P5:** For my own life, yes.

**JK:** Not just put it all on someone else?

**P5:** Yes, that's, that's exactly how... I said if I'm not gonna take responsibility for myself I'm never become, gonna become a man.

It is important to note the co-construction of meaning in the above story, where the way in which I phrased my questions shaped the direction P5's story took. My use of the word “responsibility” seemed to resonate with P5 and he went on to equate responsibility-taking to becoming a man. P2, P5 and P9's stories allude to typically masculine values of autonomy, control and independence where successfully being a man is dependent on embodying these values (Carlsson, 2013; Kolind et al., 2017; Søgaard et al., 2016). For some of the participants this was also reflected in their discussion of goals for the future. P3 was looking for employment and noted: “You must go work for yourself man. Nothing is, nothing is for free man ... you must lift you up, and go work for yourself. You must be your own, money in your pockets”. P6 wanted to move out of his mother's home: “I feel, I must move in my own way. Like, becoming an independent person”. Similarly, Søgaard et al. (2016) found that the young men in their study who were attempting to give up crime and gang-related activities aspired to be more independent and autonomous. Their stories of desistance largely reflected individualistic values of self-responsibility and personal development (Kolind et al., 2017). While these values clearly also supported the participants in the current study in their desistance, the short-coming of this sort of individualistic thinking is that

responsibility for change rests solely on the individual, without the context being taken into account (Deuchar et al., 2016; Kolind et al., 2017).

While the participants' formation of a purposive intention as well as their need for independence and to take responsibility for their lives clearly played a role in exiting the gang and maintaining their reform, the protective resources provided by their social context were key in these processes. An individual might have every intention of changing his/her behaviour, but in order for this intention to be realised, he/she needs to have an enabling social context that supports and maintains this change. For the participants in this study this included being able to access social support (via their loved ones, the community and education and rehabilitation programmes in prison) and religious support (from religious institutions and their belief system).

## **6.6 Social support**

All of the participants shared stories of drawing on mechanisms of social support in their process of exiting their gangs, stopping drugs and maintaining their changed lifestyles. This included support from family members, intimate partners, faith-based institutions and rehabilitation programmes in prison. Many accessed these social support mechanisms after forming an intention to change their lives, but some - particularly those following the absolution pathway (as discussed in the previous chapter) - began to access social support before forming this intention.

### **6.6.1 Support from loved ones and significant others**

Both desistance research that has employed a resilience lens, as well as gang desistance research more generally, shows that being able to access social support may be a key factor in desistance. Criminal offenders and gang members - in South Africa and abroad - who are successful in desisting from crime and gang involvement report on the importance of having access to emotional and social support from family members, friends, intimate partners, social services in the community, and other prosocial adults such as counsellors, religious leaders, probation officers or mentors, in their desistance (Albert, 2008; Carr & Vandiver, 2001; Chalas & Grekul, 2017; Daniels & Adams, 2010; Decker et al., 2014; Fast, 2013; Goodwill & Ishiyama, 2016; Kelly & Ward, 2012; Lodewijks et al., 2010; Mandel, 2006; Muñoz, 2014; O'Neal et al., 2016; Rice, 2015; Steinberg, 2004; Stubbs, 2014; Todis et al., 2001). The findings of this study appear to be in line with this, as participants turned to

their family members, intimate partners and other significant people in their life (for example, a pastor) for help in exiting the gang life.

For instance, P3's mother played a supportive role when it came to exiting his gang and stopping drugs in that she connected him to the gang intervention programme run by the Centre: "My mommy found out of this place. And so my mommy did send me to here, to the rehab. And it changed my life" (P3). Similarly, P6 also turned to his family for support when it came to stopping his drug use (he left his gang while in prison). At the time of deciding to stop drugs he had been living on the streets as his family had kicked him out of their home:

**P6:** So somehow I have to pick myself up and have to go and ask, "listen I have a problem. And I need someone to help me". And I would please like you to give me answer now I'm waiting. And they said "ok I can give you an hour, go wash yourself, go clean yourself, and come back in a hour, we will take you to a place". And that is where it all started, when I entered the programme.

Importantly, as P6's story illustrates, the participants played an active role in drawing on support from their family, thereby demonstrating their agency in this process. However, without having *access* to protective resources within the environment, it is unlikely that the desistance process could unfold (Ungar, 2008). In the case of P3 and P6 (and other participants) one such protective resource was the social support provided by their families who in turn had access to a form of social capital. Social capital can be defined as the relational ties, social investments, and resources to which a person has access (Boeck et al., 2008; Moule, Decker, & Pyrooz, 2013). A key element of social capital is that these networks (relational ties, social investments and resources) have value for people (Putnam 2001) in that they can enhance well-being and provide access to opportunities, education and employment (Boeck et al., 2008; Moule et al., 2013). Social capital can be both formal (for example, a labour union) and informal (for instance, a group of people who gather together once a week) (Putnam, 2001). The concept of social capital has been applied to gang-related research. For example, Deuchar and Holligan (2010) explored how youngsters in Glasgow, Scotland in the context of gangs, accumulate and maximise different forms of social capital. They found that for many youngsters, gang membership created an opportunity for positive social bonding and networking, which compensated for a lack of social capital in their home lives as a result of poverty and deprivation. On the other hand, there was also evidence that some youngsters benefitted from the social support of family members and other young people in steering

them away from violence. This illustrates that bonding in both the context of the gang and the family can provide social networks and security (Deuchar & Holligan, 2010).

It is important to note that those with access to social capital outside the gang may be more able to leave gangsterism given that they can integrate into environments that are not within the context of the gang (Moule et al., 2013). In the current study, the social capital outside of the gang accessed by the majority of the participants through their families was the Centre, which offered a gang intervention programme. Importantly, the Centre (a faith-based institution) is well known and respected in the community, and provides services that are affordable and accessible to community members. Furthermore, the services available through the gang intervention programme are free to participants as the programme is funded by the City of Cape Town. Significantly, the gang intervention programme also includes a rehabilitation component (C. Engel, personal communication, May 2017). For individuals who, like P3 and P6, have a history of both gang involvement and drug abuse this is important. Although not directly explored in this study (given the focus on gang desistance), one could speculate that the participants' ability to enrol in a recovery programme for their drug abuse played a supportive role in their desistance from gangsterism. Indeed research shows that recovery from alcohol or drug abuse has a positive influence on desistance from crime (Van Roeyen et al., 2016). If the participants had not been able to get help for their drug abuse they may have been hindered in their ability to desist from the gang life and, further, to maintain this desistance given that drug use can be a risk and confounding factor in the desistance process (Van Roeyen et al., 2016).

#### **6.6.1.1 Meaningful support**

According to resilience theory, individuals have agency in the process of resilience in that they actively draw on the protective resources that are available to them in their environment (Ungar, 2008; as is seen in P6's story above). Another component of this agency is that the resources that are drawn on need to be experienced as meaningful to the individual in order for resilience (and relatedly, desistance) to unfold (Ungar, 2008). When P3 discussed his process of change he noted that the first time he went to the rehabilitation centre he did not take the gang intervention programme seriously:

**P3:** So I did see I was playing that time, for that six weeks I was playing man. I don't wanna, I want to be the clown there ... So I didn't take note of the things that they give for us, and they write on the board. So I just want to, I just make a joke, I was

making jokes, and fun ... And that is the thing, when I go home, I was relapsed ... And the second time I going there then I ask [my outreach worker], this time around I gonna show you, this time around I'm gonna show you, I'm gonna show you ... the second time I gonna make a big change.

What P3's story illustrates is that his experience of the gang intervention programme only became meaningful to him the second time he went to the Centre, which is when he truly committed to changing his life. Perhaps this meaningfulness was fuelled by his desire to demonstrate his changed lifestyle to his outreach worker. Indeed the outreach workers and other staff at the Centre played a supportive role in many of the participants' lives. P2 discussed what the outreach workers did for him while he was enrolled in the gang intervention programme:

**P2:** Every week they came to check up on me how am I doing, what do I need, do they need to go to my family to go ask for this, and go ask for that. And then they take you out on a lunch break maybe, and have one on one sessions with you.

Many of the staff members at the Centre, including the outreach workers, are themselves former gang members. The support they offer may be even more valuable and meaningful then, as they can relate to what the participants are going through. This was discussed by P2 in relation to one of the other study participants, who was also living and working at the rehabilitation centre like him. He noted: "We can only look up to each other and encourage each other, about our past, and what has happened". Similarly, participants in a gang intervention programme in Canada reported that being around other people who were exiting the gang life reinforced their own decisions to maintain their desistance (Deane et al., 2007). Desisting gang members need not only meaningful support, but also practical and emotional support, which is the focus of the following section.

#### **6.6.1.2 Practical and emotional support**

In the current study the participants discussed having access to continuous practical and emotional support. This is important in light of the challenges faced by individuals after leaving their gang. One particular challenge is finding employment given the stigma attached to gangsterism and the likely criminal record gang members will hold (Cooper & Ward,

2012; Søgaard et al., 2016). P11 was able to manage this challenge by working for his church when he came out of prison:

**P11:** You see the church here, the only thing why I stayed away totally of gangsterism now, coming out, otherwise I would have been on the street. This church is prepared, they give me R3000<sup>24</sup> a month. So now I can give something to my wife.

This points to the important role faith-based institutions can play in practically supporting individuals coming out of prison or exiting the gang life as they can offer a social network that can connect individuals to resources, including financial support (Brenneman, 2014). Former gang members or criminals who are not able to find work may feel pressure to re-join a gang, as it offers an easy way to make money. In the current study half of the participants were employed by the Centre: five of them worked for the gang intervention programme while one worked as a facilitator for the rehabilitation programme. Further, two participants were being partly supported by the Centre: P5 was able to live at the rehabilitation centre for free while completing his studies and P1 was enrolled in a Seaman's course through the organisation. And as noted above, P11 was employed by a church in the study community. These participants therefore had access to practical support through faith-based institutions after having left their gangs. This support helped them to manage financial challenges they may have experienced in finding housing, legitimate sources of income, and education opportunities.

It is important to note, though, that access to this kind of support may be unique to this sample, given their association with the Centre and (for one of the participants) a local church in the community, who were able to provide them with financial resources, including employment. Unemployment in the study community is high: In 2011 (when the most recent census data was collected) the unemployment rate was reported to be 35.5 percent (City of Cape Town, 2013), while the national unemployment rate in 2017 was 27.7 percent (Statistics South Africa, 2017a). Thus, while the majority of this study's participants were able to access employment, this may not be the case for other desisting gang members in South Africa who are not affiliated with these kinds of faith-based institutions.

The participants in this study also had access to emotional support through these faith based organisations and leaders. Gang desistance research shows that social support that is

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<sup>24</sup> Approximately 225 US dollars

characterised by emotionally supportive, caring, and non-judgmental relationships that allow the individual to feel important, acknowledged and valued may be particularly important in desistance (Mandel, 2006; Muñoz, 2014; Rice, 2015). P11, who left gangsterism while in prison, noted that a pastor from the study community would visit him while he was serving his prison sentence: “Over these years he have supported me, inside of prison”. While P11 did not go into more detail on this, it is possible that having this kind of continued support encouraged him to maintain his reform, and to resist pressure to re-join a prison gang. P8 noted that when he faced a challenge in his life: “I can come to [the Centre], I can come to Pastor and I can tell him ‘Pastor, this thing is bothering me, this thing, this thing’. You understand, I have spiritual mentors”. P3 noted that he turned to his mother and fellow community members when he felt tempted to use drugs again:

**P3:** And I can speak with my mommy man, every day if I feel bored. “Mom I don’t feel right now”... I explain my ma, don’t feel right now, I crave man, I smaak [want] to smoke man ... And I, also my people in the road, I also can speak to my people in the road man. Because the people know I changed my life.

P3 and P8 therefore had people in their lives that they could turn to in managing challenges. This is particularly important in relation to drug-related challenges, given that relapse into drug use is a risk factor for recidivism (Van Roeyen et al., 2016).

P2 discussed a particular difficulty he experienced while living at the rehabilitation centre. When he would return home to visit his family, friends from the gang of which he was a member would approach him:

**P2:** I got many friends that, that showed me “yoh, here’s the drugs again, here’s the gun, you know how to do your thing”. And I said “no man I’m long time done with that life, that is not for me anymore”.

Similarly, a former gang member in Daniels and Adams (2010) study noted that after exiting the gang life he was presented with numerous opportunities from his former gang to earn money through selling drugs. As Daniels and Adams (2010) note “By saying no to such offers speak to [his] resilience [in] resist[ing] accepting the tempting offers of gangsters” (p. 53).

In the current study P2 was also able to resist the pressure from his peers to re-engage with gang related activities. Although not discussed directly in relation to this incident, his commitment may be supported by the outreach workers (as discussed above on p. 147 – “Every week they came to check up on me how am I doing”), and also by his fiancée (a recovering drug addict like him) who appeared to play an encouraging role in his life when it came to his drug addiction:

**P2:** Sometimes the temptation come up, going again to drugs. But then I always tell my engaged partner: “listen here, I feel like doing drugs now”. And then she can encourage me and, no man, this is not the life you want for, this is not the life she want for me and not the life that she want us to be in together.

P2’s partner therefore helped him in managing his temptations to relapse by motivating him to focus on the life that they want to have together – a life without drugs. Support from romantic partners was evident in other participants’ stories too. Indeed being in a meaningful romantic relationship has been identified as playing a role in desistance from gangsterism (Carson & Vecchio, 2015) and in recovery from drug abuse (Hser, 2007).

P10 also discussed a challenge he was facing and how his partner was able to help him. He noted that he had been struggling to fulfil his financial obligations as he had not been paid for his work as an outreach worker at the Centre for several months<sup>25</sup>. He experienced this as a threat to his manhood but noted that his wife “support me a lot and then she make me feel no it’s ok, you are the man, but there’s this thing you have to face”, thereby positively reaffirming his identification with a new form of masculinity. Thus, P2 and P10’s stories illustrate the important role romantic partners can play in managing challenges (such as temptations to use drugs and financial difficulties) associated with maintaining a reformed lifestyle.

Support came not only from the partners of participants, but also significant figures in the community. For instance, P7 turned to his probation officer when he needed support. While in the gang P7 was charged with possession of a weapon. Once he had already left the gang he was given a three year suspended sentence:

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<sup>25</sup> During the second round of interviews with the participants, the Centre were waiting on funding for their gang-intervention programme, which meant that there were delays in employees getting paid.

**P7:** The parole officer actually motivate, motivated me, he actually told me something that, that I had actually took with me up until now. He told me, “P7 you can do it, but you need to take one day at a time you know for those three years”... So, I decided ok, cool, let’s try this you know. ... Every day I just ... progress, progress and progress.

It appears that P2, P7 and P10 internalised the support and advice given to them. For P2, this encouraged him to not use drugs again, for P10 it made him feel as though he can still be a man, in spite of not being able to financially provide for his family, and for P7 it helped him to manage his suspended three year sentence. Meaningful life-course events (such as forming a romantic relationship) can be internalised by individuals in a way that shapes their future behaviour (King, 2013a). It is possible that the relationships these participants formed with their romantic partners (P2 and P10) and probation officer (P7) constituted meaningful life events. Through these relationships they were offered support in managing challenges they faced, which they internalised and used to guide their behaviour.

### **6.6.2 Support systems in prison**

Other participants were supported in their process of leaving the gang and maintaining reform through rehabilitation programmes offered in prison. In South Africa the mission of the Department of Correctional Services (DCS) is to place rehabilitation of offenders at the centre of all departmental activities, in partnership with public and private organisations (Herbig & Hesselink, 2014). In their most recent annual performance plan the DCS recognised the “need for an even greater focus on rehabilitation and social reintegration” (DCS, 2017, p. 11).

In theory, rehabilitation in prison takes a holistic approach, focusing on the specific needs of each offender, and engaging them at social, moral, spiritual, physical, vocational, educational, intellectual and mental levels. However, the feasibility of this approach is dependent on the availability of staff (including, for example, social workers and psychologists) as well as on the overcrowding rate of the prison (Herbig & Hesselink, 2014). Unfortunately, many of South Africa’s prisons suffer from severe overcrowding and staff shortages, thereby limiting the availability and effectiveness of rehabilitation services (Cilliers & Smit, 2007; Herbig & Hesselink, 2014). In 2008 the overcrowding rate in prisons across the country was reported to be 143.11 percent, with some specific cases being over 200 percent, while in 2010 to 2011 there was a 51 percent vacancy rate for psychologists, and social workers had up to 3000 cases per person (Herbig & Hesselink, 2014; Hesselink &

Herbig, 2010). In the current study, though, several participants discussed engaging with rehabilitation programmes on offer, and the positive impact this had on their desistance.

While P10 (as discussed in section 5.4) remained in the Numbers gang when in prison for “protection” and because he saw it as “who I am in prison”, he also expressed no longer having a “desire” to be a gangster anymore, and started engaging in various activities in prison, including belonging to a church group and attending social work classes - some of the rehabilitation services that DCS is meant to provide (Cilliers & Smit, 2007).

**P10:** Prison can have a ... different effect on different people ... You can, you can change for good and you can change for bad. And I did really try to change for good. I did partake in everything that is good even though I was a prison gangster ... I did, I did belong to the church group and ... I did all my social work classes that I supposed to attend.

Although P10 only stopped identifying as a gangster when he left prison, his discussion points to the important role the prison system can play in supporting criminal offenders, including gang members, who want to engage in rehabilitation and “change for the good”.

As part of their rehabilitation services, the DCS also offers formal education and training programmes to inmates that are presented by qualified educationists. The educational programmes are categorised into adult basic education and training (Grades 1-9), mainstream education (Grades 10-12, or levels 2-4 – what P5 calls NTC2- NTC4 below), and tertiary education. (Cilliers & Smit, 2007). P5 spoke of his experience receiving an education in prison, while still engaging in gang activities:

**P5:** My teacher always came and he say to me, “you see what you can do, you can do this”. You know and I passed NTC2. And I said to myself, wow, I’ve passed NTC2, that’s Grade 10 ... You know and, but I was still in trouble, I was still dealing with these drugs thingies, I was still being this gangster while I was going to school.

However, later on he started to “let go everything [he] did as a gangster”. He explained this further saying:

**P5:** You know because I was very aggressive. So I start to work on my anger, you know I went back again to the anger management, start to work, I prayed a lot, I prayed like every day. You know I prayed, I prayed just for help, just for help, to get out of this life, out of this nightmare. And as I did it, I managed, from NTC2 until NTC4, I completed my matric [Grade 12].

It may be that through these rehabilitation programmes P5 and P10 were able to see the skills he had and start imagining a life without gangsterism and crime (Stevens, 2012). Unfortunately at this point P5 still had several more years to serve in prison and he felt frustrated by not being able to use his education while completing his sentence: “And I’m like I don’t care about this school thingy anymore, because I’m still behind bars. What will I do with education, it don’t work here. And so I went back to gangsterism”. P5’s story illustrates the fluidity of the desistance process – making a change from being a gangster to being a former gangster is not always clear cut. Criminal offending - and, arguably, gang-related offending - can follow a “zig zag path” (Carlsson, 2012, p.4) where the individual may alternate between periods of engaging in criminal behaviours and long gaps in between (Carlsson, 2012; Deuchar et al., 2016)

While having an education and a supportive teacher, attending anger management classes and embracing religion clearly played a role in P5’s transformation, these things did not immediately result in him fully desisting from his gang, illustrating that desistance is not a single event but a complex process. When P5 was released from prison his parents introduced him to an outreach worker at the Centre. Initially, he was not interested in the programmes offered there: “I didn’t care my first time, you know”, and continued engaging in gang activities. Around this time a key dealer in the drug business was killed and there was talk in his gang of P5 taking over his position:

**P5:** I was like, really must I take over? Or must I go for my dream? I didn’t know. You know I was in this battle now. And so I said to myself, let’s go and try make my dream. You know and that’s where I call my outreach worker ... and I told her “I wanna go to the [gang intervention programme]”.

It seems that the possibility of moving up in the drug trade prompted P5 to think about what path he wanted his life to take: whether he wanted to pursue his dream (of becoming involved in the music business), or become a higher ranking drug dealer. He chose the former

path and from this point on he committed to disengaging from his gang. P5's story nicely illustrates the interplay between agency and environment: He formed an intention to change his life for good, and was able to draw on protective resources available to him in his environment in making this change (his outreach worker and the gang intervention programme the Centre offered). Because he completed his education in prison, P5 was also able to enrol in a film and media college after completing the gang intervention programme, and thus could pursue his dream of becoming involved in the music business. Therefore, while the education he received did not immediately result in him changing his life, it stood him in good stead for his later change.

### **6.6.3 Limited access to protective resources**

Unfortunately, however, not all participants were able to access these kind of protective resources. P3, for example, was struggling to find work: "I'm unemployed now at the moment, looking for a job". His dream was to study music and then to teach music to youth in his suburb: "I look forward now man to make a better change now to, to read music and, for the community, to help the community". His commitment to this goal was clear as he returned to it several times. Indeed he seemed to view me as a potential resource in helping him achieve this goal, perhaps given my race and middle class position. Initially, he thought I was from the United States and discussed his desire to perform music overseas<sup>26</sup>:

**P3:** I want to go overseas man

**JK:** You want to go overseas?

**P3:** There by your place, and introduce Cape Town there man.

When I told him I was from Cape Town he then went on to ask: "Isn't there a school where you can put me in, a music school?"<sup>27</sup> While P5 was able to pursue his music-related goal (perhaps through having completed school and being given a bursary), P3 was not. He had a strong intention to follow a particular path, but his social environment may not make it a feasible or possible option for him (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). He may need be encouraged to consider opportunities that are more realistic in his social environment (King, 2013a). It is important to note, though, that what protective resources are provided and in

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<sup>26</sup> See section 4.8 above for a more detailed discussion on the implications this has for reflexivity.

<sup>27</sup> I connected P3 with a music school in a suburb close to where he lives that offers music lessons that are more affordable than most private institutions.

what quantity is largely determined by those who hold political and social power in society (Ungar, 2015).

During the apartheid era, the Group Areas Act of 1950 allowed for the systemised segregation of race groups through assigning the races to different geographic locations. White South Africans were assigned the largest and most resourced areas in the country, while African, coloured and Indian South Africans were forcibly moved to less desirable areas, mostly on the Cape Flats (Pinnock, 2016; Salo, 2007b). During this time, state funds were channelled into white areas, which left black and coloured areas such as the Cape Flats with inadequate infrastructure (including housing, schools and hospitals) and derelict communal areas. While the government post-apartheid has made some strides in redistributing wealth, the impact of this can, at best, be described as modest (Standing, 2003b). Thus, life in the Cape Flats is largely characterised by overcrowding in homes, a shortage of resources and space at schools, insufficient health care services and a chronic lack of safe communal areas (Standing, 2006). Therefore, much of the Cape Flats, including the study community, is inadequately resourced by the state when it comes to supporting those who wish to disengage from gang-related and other delinquent activities, and follow a more prosocial path.

However, the participants in this study were able to draw on the limited protective resources available to them (including social support from loved ones, community members, faith-based institutions and rehabilitation services in prison) in successfully desisting from gang involvement. Another protective resource drawn on by the participants was religious support, which is the focus of the following section.

## **6.7 Religious support**

Along with the emotional, social and practical support participants' received, their stories of desistance also centred on support they obtained through their religious belief systems. While the notion that religion is a protective factor when it comes to committing crime seems intuitive and is buttressed by sociological and criminological theories, research has produced equivocal results (Giordano et al., 2008; Schroeder & Frana, 2009). For instance, several studies have found no difference between religious and non-religious youth when it comes to offending (Benda and Corwyn, 1997; Evans et al., 1996; Hirschi & Stark, 1969; Krohn et al., 1982). In a more recent longitudinal study Giordano et al. (2008) found that religiosity was not significantly related to sustained desistance. However, in the qualitative component of the study many participants reported that religion played a critical

role in their desistance. Furthermore, in neighbourhoods that are socially and economically disadvantaged, the positive effects of religiosity can be hindered given that steady employment and prosocial partners and peers may be in short supply (Giordano et al., 2008).

There is also research that supports the notion that religious belief reduces delinquency: A meta-analysis on religion and criminality found that religious beliefs and behaviours have a moderate effect on reducing criminal behaviour (Baier & Wright, 2001). Furthermore, becoming religious has been identified as playing a role in desistance amongst both former criminal offenders (Giordano et al., 2002; Hallett & McCoy, 2015; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009) and former gang members (Berger et al., 2016; Bolden, 2013; Bubolz, 2014; Carson & Vecchio, 2015). This is the case in South African research on gang desistance too (Daniels & Adams, 2010; Rodgers & Jensen, 2015; Steinberg, 2004; Wijnberg & Green, 2014). Indeed religious programmes are becoming more prominent in facilitating gang exit (Flores, 2016). Furthermore, engagement with religion is recognised as a protective mechanism in the process of resilience amongst young people, both in South Africa and abroad (Dass-Brailsford, 2005; Malindi & Theron, 2010; Masten, 2014; Ungar, 2011).

Some participants' stories illustrated that religion gave their lives meaning. When P7 left his gang and stopped using drugs he converted to Christianity:

**P7:** I'm a born again Christian now so for this ten years. So that was a ... great motivation for me and, and for me being, being born again plays a big, big role in my life to make stand where I'm at today. Because without me being born again I don't think I really, I will make it. You know, because I didn't know what I stand for, what did I believe in and what to do, direction. But the Bible did really give me direction, and the Bible really play, play a big role in my life.

Although P7 does not say directly, leaving the gang life may have resulted in a loss of purpose for him and religion could help him to manage this challenge by giving him a sense of meaning and direction (Berger et al., 2016; Maruna et al., 2006). In Maruna et al.'s (2006) study with prisoner converts, participants discussed using stories and lessons from the Bible as a means by which to make sense of their lives and challenges they were facing. Indeed religious scripture can be an important cognitive resource for desistance (Hallett & McCoy, 2015). Religion seemed to fulfil a similar function for P8, who also converted to Christianity when he exited gangsterism:

**P8:** If there's one thing that I can say, say that, the power, how can I say the, the power source, the source, for me staying the way I am ... first of all it's God, it's him that keeps me, that sustains me. Because there's many times in my life when, why should I still walk this road, whereby it is so much easier if I would just go back to the life of crime. It is so much easier to get money, it is so much easier to get what I want. You understand. But then God reminds me, telling me "P8, do you know where I've taken you from? Don't forget it". You understand.

P8's story illustrates that his religious beliefs helped him to maintain a crime-free lifestyle. It gave him a cognitive frame for understanding his past and how he ended up where he is today, which motivated him to continue along the same path. According to the theory of social control, if an individual has bonds with religion or religious institutions, this can serve to deter them from criminal activities (Giordano et al., 2008). However, religion can act not only as a mechanism for external control over an individual's behaviour; it can also offer an interpretative system from which to understand and make sense of the world (Giordano et al., 2008; Maruna et al., 2006) – "a clear blueprint for how to proceed as a changed individual" (Giordano et al., 2008, p. 116). At the time of being interviewed P8 was facing a difficult challenge in his life. During his gang membership he had been arrested for possession of drugs. The case was dropped but had now been reopened:

**P8:** But yet through it all man, understand, I will stand steadfast, understand. Because, going back isn't a [sic] option, going back into the life of crime and criminal act, all these type. It isn't, it isn't, no. There's nothing left there, understand so. So ja, I just keep up the faith and move along.

In her discussion on coloured masculinities in South Africa, Salo (2007b) argues that religious practices and beliefs can offer an alternative tough masculinity, where men's ability to resist the temptation to engage in illegal activities (that will likely give them a source of income) can be achieved through their exercise of spiritual and moral self-discipline. This may be applicable to P8's story: Despite the challenge of possibly being prosecuted, his religious belief system helps him to "stand steadfast ... keep up the faith and move along". Thus, participants like P8 may have been able to use their religious beliefs as a way of achieving a sense of identity as coloured men, and a new "steadfast" masculinity.

Religion also offered some participants a means to manage temptations to use drugs again. P2 noted that if he has an urge to use drugs he “always try to pray to the Lord”. Similarly P3 said “And if I feel so, I read the Bible or maybe I go to Mosque”. Indeed there is evidence that religious support has a strong and robust prosocial effect on substance use amongst former criminal offenders (Stansfield, Mowen, O'Connor, & Boman, 2017).

### **6.7.1 Religion is respected by the gangs**

Becoming religious not only gave the participants a means of managing their challenges and a new found sense of meaning and purpose, it was also seen as an acceptable way of leaving the gang as the Cape Flats gangs seem to respect the religious institution (Daniels & Adams, 2010; Pinnock, 2016; Rodgers & Jensen, 2015; Wijnberg & Green, 2014). In Wijnberg and Green's (2014) study with male gang members in Cape Town, participants felt that it may be possible to leave the gang life if a lifestyle change of becoming religious and showing dedication to one's religion is made. This is reflected in the current study:

**P6:** In gangsterism you can't pull out. Because why there's rules and regulations, if you pull out, there's consequences ... Because why you are one of us now, you are wearing our tattoo in your blood, so if you wanna pull out, we will come take your blood. That is how it work.

**JK:** But I mean that didn't happen for you when you did eventually leave?

**P6:** You see the difference with me is: I was making the right decision, you see ... I was changing my life and I show it. And I choose to follow God. And I mean they can't disrespect like religious wise. That's one thing, they will rather encourage you to go, but they will watch you very closely.

Similarly, P12 noted: “If you want to leave the gang, you must rather get converted, that's the best way out, to get out of the gang. But the guys will monitor you for a very long time”. P9 also discussed the gangs respecting those who turn to religion. When I asked him why he thought this was the case he responded: “Because it's like you not, you not turning your back on the gang”. P9 explained this further saying that you cannot exit the gang to join another gang, or to become involved with an organisation where the information you have on your gang can be used against them (for example, a neighbourhood watch group). However, “if you make your exit towards like, I'm accepting Christ, so you making an exit to a higher

power, they respect that" (P9). P6 unpacked this notion of respect for religion a bit further: "You see ... I think it's just they, they already knew that, if you, if you go with religious stuff they, at the back of their mind in their heart, they knew it's the right thing"

The participants' turn to religion was therefore partly informed by the gangs' inherent respect for religious conversion. Becoming religious, in their minds, does not mean you are being disloyal to the gang. Rather, they see religion as being the "right thing", although they will keep a close eye on you to ensure you truly have changed – a finding echoed in other South African research (Daniels & Adams, 2010; Rodgers & Jensen, 2015; Wijnberg & Green, 2014) and research in Central America (Brenneman, 2014).

From some of the participants' stories it was clear that the Cape Flats gangs not only respected the religious institution but also respected the family institution. As P9 noted: "If you make your exit to, I'm becoming a family man, they would respect that". Similarly, when P4 left the gang his fellow members came to him and he said to them: "'You see, I'm married man, you see my children'... That's why they respect me for that man. I didn't change to run away from that gang, I did change because I want to change for my family's sake".

Therefore, becoming a family or religious man are considered two respectable ways of leaving the gang. Similarly, other gang research has found that those who leave the gang in order to care for their families do not face a hostile exit (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). This is not to suggest, however, that committing to one's family or embracing religion are simply ways of avoiding turning one's back on the gang, and the violence or death that may result in this. While this clearly serves as a strong motivation for leaving the gang, this motivation is underpinned by the experience of a transformation in identity (as can be seen in Chapter Five) in that the participants moved from the gangster identity, to a more prosocial identity (such as that of a family or religious man), that clearly supported their desistance (as will become clear in the following section).

In summary, the participants' religious belief systems supported them in their desistance process (which included managing challenges such as temptations to use drugs) by offering them a sense of meaning and purpose and by giving them a cognitive frame through which to understand their lives. The participants were also supported in their desistance through the occupation of prosocial identity positions, which is the focus of the following two sections.

## 6.8 Supportive prosocial identities

As discussed in the section 6.5, one aspect of agency in the desistance process - according to King (2013b) - is the envisioning and constructing of a new, prosocial identity. According to some scholars - for instance, F.-Dufour and Brassard (2014) - these identities can provide desisting individuals with resources that they can draw on to achieve their goals. Likewise, in the resilience literature there is recognition that the formation of positive identities can promote resilience in individuals facing adversity in that people can draw on protective resources while exploring and committing to developing identities (Chen et al., 2012; Webb et al., 2017). For example, someone who takes on a religious identity has access to particular beliefs that can provide moral guidance and psychological security (Chen et al., 2012).

In Chapter Five I explored the participants' prosocial identities of religious men and positive role models to their families and in their communities. In the following two sections, I focus on the participants' prosocial identities as actively involved family men and community members, shedding light on *how* these identities supported the participants in their desistance.

### 6.8.1 Caring for one's family

Many participants shared stories on fatherhood and being a husband in relation to their desistance from gangsterism. Shortly before P7 left his gang, his son was born:

**P7:** When he was born that make me realise ... I got responsibilities. I was a little bit matured there, you know. So I thought, ok now I need to get out of this gang and go work for my baby and stuff like that. Because the girl I make pregnant was also very poor, so I also thought no I need to take responsibility. And that was a great motivation to change my life.

Fatherhood appeared to open up an opportunity for participants like P7 to leave the gang life, a finding common in other gang desistance research, including South African work (Berger et al., 2016; Bubolz, 2014; Chalas & Grekul, 2017; Daniels & Adams, 2010; Deane et al., 2007; Decker et al., 2014; Flores, 2011; Mandel, 2006; Moloney et al., 2009; Pyrooz & Decker, 2014). For instance, for one participant in Daniels and Adams' (2010) study, the birth of his daughter forced him to reflect on his new identity as a father, and compare himself to his own father who had been absent from his life. He decided to "break the

generational continuity of the absent father” and be present in his son’s life (p. 52). In the current study, parenthood provided participants like P7 a sense of purpose as he had a child for whom he felt responsible. This sense of purpose acted as a protective resource in that it supported P7 in his desistance. This is echoed in Moloney et al.’s (2009) study on fatherhood and gang desistance where becoming a father prompted gang members to re-evaluate their lives and gave them “something or someone to care for and about” (Moloney et al., 2009, p. 314).

However, for some participants becoming a father was not immediately a motivator for leaving the gang life: sometimes their desire to embrace the fathering role only came about when their children were older, perhaps reflecting that fatherhood needs to be experienced as meaningful by the individual in order for it to support actual change (Moloney et al., 2009). P12 spoke about wanting to commit to his family as a source of motivation for leaving his gang. When he won his appeal and was able to leave prison (as discussed above in section 5.6) he noted “I’ve got kids that’s growing up”. Elsewhere in his interview he said: “[My wife] must work for my kids while I’m in jail. I mean, that isn’t right”. Similarly, P1 who experienced a drug relapse, discussed his desire to support his family as a way of dealing with the challenge of his relapse:

**P1:** Only my wife is working in the house, so how's it look, bad for me. My wife stands up in the morning she go work, and I'm still laying. It's not good for me. At the end of the day I want my wife to lay, and me to go stand up to go work for her.

P1 and P12’s stories suggest that they view financially providing for one’s family as the role of the man, not the woman. This draws on a discourse of masculinity where being a good father or husband is equated with being able to provide financially for one’s family (Carlsson, 2013; Clowes, Ratele, & Shefer, 2013; Graham, 2014). For both P1 and P12 - and for other participants like P7 above - their desire to fulfil this provider role supports the desistance process (including managing challenges such as a drug relapse): P1 stopped using drugs and embarked on a Seaman’s course with the hope of finding work; P7 left his gang, ceased his drug use, and found employment in the supermarket industry, and P12 also left his gang and became a construction worker (although, as discussed in section 5.6, he only stopped using drugs after attending a church service with a colleague).

While taking on the identity of a provider may be helpful to those desisting from gangsterism who are able to find legitimate employment and support their families, it is

important to highlight the possible shortcomings of this identity position. Firstly, it can be harmful to women as it may place them in a position of dependence in which they have to submit to the authority of their male partners. This was alluded to in some of the participants' interviews. For instance, P7 felt that a man is supposed to be "a provider, a protector [and] a priest" in the home, while "women is supposed to support the man". Importantly, however, not all participants fully endorsed this way of thinking. For example, in his interview P4 discussed how he communicates with his wife in times of conflict: "and I tell her man, not like I want to be a bossy over you - I can't be a boss over you, I'm your husband". In contrast to P7 above, P4 sees himself and his wife as being on equal footing – he does not want to be in a position of authority over her.

A second shortcoming of the provider identity position is that it is particularly challenging for some men to live up to this expectation given the alarmingly high rates of unemployment in South Africa (Clowes et al., 2013), particularly amongst black and coloured populations. The unemployment rate across South Africa in 2017 was 27.7 percent (Statistics South Africa, 2017a). In 2011 (when the most recent census data was collected) the study community (an area with predominantly coloured people) had an unemployment rate of 35.5 percent (City of Cape Town, 2013). If men are not able to fulfil the financial provider role, it may lead to a sense of masculine failure, which could make the desistance process more difficult (Søgaard et al., 2016).

During the second round of interviews, the study participants who worked for the Centre had not been paid for several months due to a delay in funding being made available to the organisation. Some of them discussed this in their interviews. For example, P7 noted: "it's embarrassing for a man not to provide for his wife". P10 explored this in more detail:

**P10:** Like this time now ... I've got a bond [mortgage], I've got a house, I've got cars, I got stuff that I must pay. And ... that's the issue where you gonna get me to, because I wanna be the man, I wanna be the provider and when you take that from me, that make me awkward, ja. You can throw me with anything but don't throw with my manhood, that's no. I'm the man, you know.

For P10 not being able to fulfil his financial responsibilities and provide for his family presented a challenge in that it threatened his masculine identity as a provider. When P10 was a gang member he may have responded to this challenge by becoming violent. However, he (like many of the other participants) no longer embraced this particular masculine identity

where violence is revered. Rather, he is able to put himself in a more vulnerable position, and allow his wife to emotionally support him. He said in his interview that his wife: support me a lot and ...make me feel no it's ok, you are the man, but there's this thing you have to face", thereby positively reaffirming his masculinity.

Importantly, when I asked P10 later in the interview to explain what he meant by wanting to be a provider, he responded:

**P10:** Firstly, I have to provide them with a roof, and with food ... And then I have to provide them with myself: my attention, my being there, love them, there for them ... Like be, I'm the one they can count on, who can talk to you, to be there for them, provide them with everything.

For P10, then, being a provider for his family does not only mean financially providing for them, but also being a nurturer to them. A few other participants also discussed other functions fathers can fulfil in their children's lives. P9, who does not have children, discussed the role his own father played in his life:

**P9:** He provided everything that you needed but he was never like this sit down and talk as a family man like "what's your dreams, what are your goals?" So that's the thing that he didn't do. But furthermore he made sure you got your clothes, you got, whatever you need to have, money and stuff like that also so. Ja it's just that he didn't have that father and son relationship where you can go to your dad and speak like "Daddy I'm in love with this one girl" and all that. There wasn't nothing like that. So it was everything you needed to do on your own.

P9's story suggests that he wanted his father to be more than simply a financial provider - he wanted him to be engaged and emotionally supportive. While the discourse of men as financial providers was prominent in the participants' stories, what was also clear was that several participants felt that a man's role should extend beyond this to include emotional support of his children.

Along with taking on the prosocial identity of providing for and being emotionally supportive fathers and husbands, the participants also discussed being actively involved community members, which included being leaders and giving back. This, like the caring father/husband identity, supported them in their desistance.

### **6.8.2 Giving back and being leaders**

Many of the participants shared stories of ways in which they were actively involved in their communities through giving back, including working with current and former gang members, drug addicts, and youngsters in general. For instance, P2 worked as a leader with gangsters and drug addicts at the rehabilitation programme of the Centre. When I asked him what the experience was like for him he responded: “It’s great, because I know I can make a change in some people’s lives”. Similarly, when speaking more generally about what he wanted to do in his future, P8 noted: “That is actually my goal in life, to help other people, to change their life”. Several of the participants worked for the Centre. Both P4 and P12 were employed as violence interrupters by the Centre where they worked directly with gangsters to mediate conflict between rival gangs, and also to assist youngsters who want to leave their gang. As P12 noted:

**P12:** I can change gangsters’ life. Here’s a guy now they made a film about it ... Also a shooter, killer, shoot a few people he shot dead already, he’s still young. I made him change his life... it really make me feel good.

The participants’ stories of giving back allude to the “helper therapy principle” (Riessman, 1965, p. 28) as well as the “wounded healer” (LeBel et al., 2015, p. 109) or “professional ex” phenomena (Brown, 1991, p. 219). The helper therapy principle draws attention to how an individual may benefit “from being in the helper role” (Riessman, 1965, p. 32), while the wounded healer phenomenon focuses on an individual’s desire and dedication to help and support others who have, like them, been “wounded” in some way (LeBel et al., 2015). Similarly, the professional ex- phenomenon draws attention to individuals who exit a career of deviancy by replacing it with an occupation in professional counselling that utilizes remnants of their deviant identity (Brown, 1991). The wounded healer and professional ex- phenomena have been discussed in relation to recovering substance users, formerly incarcerated individuals (Brown, 1991; LeBel, 2007; LeBel et al., 2015; Maruna, 2001; White, 2000) and, to a lesser extent, former gang members (Deucher & Weide, 2018; Søgaard et al., 2016).

Desistance research has found that one factor that distinguishes formerly incarcerated offenders who are successful in their reform from those who are unsuccessful, is their commitment to engage in activities that involve giving back to others in the community (LeBel et al., 2015; Maruna, 2001; Vaughan, 2007). In a South African study, ex-offenders

participating in a rehabilitation programme noted that they wanted to engage with their communities in a positive way (for instance, through mentoring young people; Mapham & Hefferon, 2012). In their study with young men who had a history of criminal offending and gang membership, Søgaard et al. (2016) found that involvement in or aspirations to be involved in mentor work was common in the young men's lives, as they attempted to construct a reformed masculinity for themselves.

The benefits of occupying a helper role may include gaining a sense of achievement, meaning and purpose in one's life, and strengthening one's own personal learning (Guse & Hudson, 2014; LeBel et al., 2015; Mapham & Hefferon, 2012; Maruna, 2001). This was likely the case with the participants in the current study: Being in a position to help others in changing their behaviour no doubt gave the participants a sense of responsibility and meaning, which could help them in their own personal growth and strengthen their commitment to a prosocial lifestyle.

A few participants discussed the accountability that comes with helping others. P10, who worked as an outreach worker with youth at risk and youth who want to leave their gang and/or stop using drugs, noted in his interview: "I did make myself important to other people, so for me now to go back to drugs it will disappoint a lot of people ... I must be strong for others and for myself". Similarly, P9 noted that if he were to start using drugs again:

**P9:** So all those people that I make contact with, they can also go back on drugs because they gonna tell themselves like P9 is even back on drugs so obviously I can. So that also, the accountability that I'm also having that is keeping me also going.

Being a source of motivation for and accountable to other ex-drug addicts therefore acts as a form of social control for participants like P9 and P10 to manage any temptation they may have to relapse as if this would happen they could lose their credibility (Carlsson, 2013; Søgaard et al., 2016).

Because of the participants' previous involvement with gangsterism and drugs, some of them felt that they were well-equipped to work with gangsters and drug users. In organisations that work with youth wanting to disengage from delinquent behaviour, having a history of criminal offending can be perceived as an asset (Carlsson, 2013). Densley and Pyrooz (2017) argue that the "criminal credential" (p. 15) of former gang members that once regulated their gang membership can be repurposed to give them credibility as wounded healers or professional exes. Their personal narratives of criminal offending can be shared

with others and used as a means for social integration, support and healing (Deuchar & Weide, 2018). In the current study P6 did outreach work with youngsters who are trying to stop drugs: “I am always compassionate about them because why: I know what’s the deal”, again possibly demonstrating the Centre’s “change is possible” ethos – participants like P6 are the physical proof that it is possible to leave gangsterism and stop drugs. He also said: “Nobody who weren’t there would understand what these guys going through”. Because of their own past, participants like P6 felt as though they were able to better understand those who are trying to change their lives.

Along with giving back to their community, a number of participants also discussed leadership positions they occupied since exiting their gangs. For instance, P3 noted that when he had spent time at the rehabilitation centre he “bec[ame] a leader there at [the rehabilitation centre] to praise and worship, teach”. P2 explored his leadership position at the rehabilitation centre in more detail:

**P2:** So they asked me to be the leader here. I am the leader the most ... how can I say, everything that will be asked must come to me. Even if people come in here, I must handle the payments, I must handle everything. I’m basically managing the place while the managers not here during the day or during the evenings, I’m managing the place, me and another guy. But I’m the most responsible guy here. To look after the place during the day.

P2’s story suggests that he is proud of the leadership position that was bestowed upon him. Part of the Centre’s ethos is to encourage participants of their programmes to work towards occupying leadership positions (Personal communication C Engel, May 2017). For example, P6 noted that the pastor urged him to stay on at the rehabilitation centre after he had completed his programme: “He said, ‘P6 I want you to work with these guys. Because why you understand, how their mindsets works, how their behaviour works ... You can relate to what they are going through and what the situation is’”. P6 worked at the Centre for three years and became “second in command”. The sense of responsibility that comes with being a leader is likely to make participants like P2, P3, and P6 feel important and appreciated, which – like giving back to the community - will no doubt influence the maintenance of their own reformed lifestyles.

The participants’ involvement in work that enabled them to give back to society and occupy leadership positions gave them a sense of meaning, responsibility and purpose and

made them accountable to others – all of which acted as protective resources in supporting them in their desistance (which included managing challenges).

### **6.9 Chapter summary**

Drawing on a resilience lens and an interactive framework for understanding desistance, this chapter has focused on the participants' process of leaving the gang life and maintenance of their current reform after having left the gang, which included a focus on how the participants managed challenges these processes presented (for example, temptations to use drugs again or engage in other gang-related activities as well as financial or employment difficulties). It has shown that the participants' desistance involved the formation of a purposive intention to change their lives, a commitment to change (and maintain this change), taking personal responsibility for their pasts, and striving for more independence. Further, their desistance involved actively drawing on protective resources in their environment, including practical, emotional and social support (that was experienced as meaningful) from loved ones and significant others (such as employees at the Centre and probation officers), rehabilitation programmes, and faith-based institutions and religious belief systems. Finally, this chapter has shown that the participants' occupation of prosocial identities - being involved and caring fathers and husbands, and actively engaged community members - supported them in their desistance by providing meaning, purpose and accountability.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION**

This study investigated the narratives of a group of former gang members in South Africa; in particular, how they made sense of and understood their desistance from gang involvement.

In the first section of this chapter I provide a summary of the key findings of this study, following which I explore the theoretical and practical contributions of these findings. The chapter ends with a discussion of the limitations of this study and recommendations for future research, followed by concluding remarks.

### **7.1 Summary of findings**

This study has addressed the research question “how do former gang members, through their narratives, understand and make sense of their desistance from gang involvement?” It has shown that the participants’ narratives of desistance focused on their identity transformation (Chapter Five) and their process of leaving the gang and maintaining reform after having left the gang (Chapter Six). Below I provide a summary of these findings.

#### **7.1.1 Identity transformation**

With regards to the participants’ identity transformation, their stories illustrated that this was a process (as opposed to a single event) with particular turning points. Many participants had a desire or intention to leave the gang life, or had reservations over their gang involvement for some time, but only acted on this desire or these reservations after having a particular experience(s) (turning points) that resonated with them, prompted reflection and ultimately led them to reject the gangster identity and exit the gang life. These turning points included both negative experience with their gang (for example, the threat of going to jail and not having their gang brothers visit them) and more positive experiences (for example, realising the importance of being fathers to their children).

As gang members, the participants’ stories reflected that initially the majority of them found a sense of belonging in the gang. However, over time negative gang-related experiences resulted in them becoming disillusioned with the brotherhood or support the gang purportedly offered, which resulted in their gang identity becoming less important to them and played a key role in their decision to exit the gang life. This sense of disillusionment was coupled with a fear of what may become of them if they were to stay in the gang – that they could end up alone and unsupported, or that they faced the possibility of disability or even death.

While most participants' stories centred on the theme of disillusionment, there were others whose stories focused on the notion of absolution. For these participants particular religious experiences (which sometimes took place in prison) functioned as turning points in their lives in that they enabled them to feel absolved of crimes committed in their pasts, let go of the hardened, tough and stoic gangster identity they had previously embraced, and move towards a new, more vulnerable identity from which they were able to make amends for their past crimes and also express emotions and empathize with others. Thus, religion offered these participants a replacement self that was completely separate from their previous gangster identity.

Both participants whose stories centred on absolution and those whose stories focused on disillusionment also shared stories on the more prosocial identities they aligned themselves with after having left their gangs, including becoming religious and being positive role models to their families and in their communities. Religious conversion, which may to some extent reflect that they were drawn from a faith-based organisation, was key to all the participants' stories of desistance as they moved away from a gangster identity to a religious identity of mature and rehabilitated men. Also key to their stories was the embracing of a family man identity which served to reinforce their own sense of identity transformation by enabling them to be committed husbands and fathers who mentored and cared for their families. Other participants wanted to be positive role models not only to their families, but in their communities: they strove to prove to others (in particularly, youth) through their own reformed behaviour and through giving back to the community, that leaving the gang (and not joining the gang in the first place) is a possibility, and that young people do not inevitably have to become gangsters in order to prove their worth.

### **7.1.2 Leaving the gang and maintaining reform**

While Chapter Five focused on the participants' stories of identity transformation, Chapter Six focused on their stories of leaving the gang and maintaining a reformed lifestyle after leaving, and how they managed and overcame the challenges and risks (for example, the loss of a social network and the loss of an income) associated with these processes. In this chapter I argued that the participants' desistance from gang involvement represented a typical form of resilience, while acknowledging that joining the gang may have been a form of hidden or atypical resilience for some, in that it provided them with a sense of belonging, at least for a period of time.

The participants' stories of leaving the gang and maintaining reform focused on their agency in the desistance process which included forming a purposive intention to change their lives (usually precipitated by a negative gang-related experience), committing to and maintaining this change, in spite of challenges they faced (for example, a relapse into drugs), taking personal responsibility for their pasts and striving for more independence in the future. Importantly, it also involved actively drawing on protective resources and prosocial identities available to them within their environments, thus illustrating the interactive nature of the desistance process. While an individual might have every intention of changing his/her behaviour, in order for this intention to be realised, he/she needs to have an enabling social context that supports and maintains this change. For the participants in this study this included being able to access social and religious support, and take up prosocial identities.

The participants' stories illustrated that they accessed meaningful social support through loved ones, significant others in the community and faith-based institutions and rehabilitation programmes in prison. For the majority of the participants their loved ones were able to connect them to the Centre which offered a form of social capital in the way of gang intervention services that, importantly, included a focus on substance abuse rehabilitation. The kind of social support accessed by the participants was often practical in nature in that it provided participants with particular resources that supported their desistance. This included, for example, anger management training and education (available through rehabilitation services offered in prison) as well as financial support. These resources helped the participants to manage and overcome challenges they faced after leaving the gang (for instance, finding employment), and supported them in continuing along a more prosocial path (for instance, enrolling in tertiary education). The support available through their loved ones and members of the community (for example, a pastor or an outreach worker at the Centre) was also emotionally supportive in nature, in that it offered participants the opportunity to discuss their challenges with a concerned and interested individual who could mentor them.

The participants also shared stories of support they accessed through their religious belief systems. Being religious gave them a sense of meaning and purpose as well as a cognitive frame or blueprint for understanding and making sense of their lives, which helped them to manage difficulties they faced (including, for example, the challenge of re-engaging in gang-related activities). Importantly, becoming religious seemed to be an acceptable means of exiting the gang life, as the gangs themselves appeared to have an inherent respect for religious institutions.

The participants also shared stories of the occupation of prosocial identity positions. One of these identity positions was that of a caring father and husband. This identity provided them with a sense of purpose that acted as a protective resource in supporting them in their desistance. For some participants, this identity included being a financial provider for their families. However, fulfilling the financial provider role may not always be possible in a context of limited (or no) employment opportunities (such as in the Cape Flats where the participants live), thus indicating that the participants in this study may be unique given their association with faith-based institutions like the Centre who could provide them with employment opportunities and other financial resources.

Importantly, where participants felt unable to adequately fulfil the financial provider role they could draw on the support of their intimate partners. For some participants, the caring father and husband identity extended beyond financial support to include being an emotionally supportive and actively involved father and husband. The other prosocial identity position the participants' occupied was that of an actively engaged community members, which included being leaders and giving back to their community. These identities supported the participants' in their desistance by providing them with a sense of responsibility, purpose, meaning and accountability.

Having provided a summary of the findings, I now turn to this study's theoretical contributions to the gang desistance literature.

## **7.2 Theoretical contributions**

Through life history interviewing, and guided by a critical realist narrative approach, this study has given voice to a group of male former gang members on the Cape Flats - a group that is often marginalised and stigmatised as a result of their past gang involvement. The life history interview allowed the former gang members' interests and priorities to be heard by privileging their personal perspective on desistance from gang involvement, thereby enabling their agency to come to the forefront, while also recognising that this agency is shaped by the sociocultural and material context within which it falls. Through these interviews and using a critical realist narrative approach, I was able to gain an in-depth insight into the participants' subjective accounts of desisting from gangsterism - how they personally interpreted this process, and also how it was shaped by their particular environment.

Based on the data presented in Chapters Five and Six - and drawing on this critical realist narrative approach - I propose an integrated identity- and resilience-informed theory

for understanding gang desistance. While theoretical frameworks for desistance from *crime* are well-developed (see for example, Paternoster & Bushway, 2009 and Farrall et al., 2011), and increasingly there are theories emerging that are specific to desistance from gangs (see for example, Decker et al., 2014), to the best of my knowledge there appears to be no theory that encompasses both the role that identity may play in gang desistance, as well as the role that protective resources may play in supporting the gang desistance process. Further, while theoretical frameworks for desistance from crime can be useful in understanding gang desistance, it is important to note that desistance from crime may be very different to desistance from gangs, given that while crime desistance involves the stopping of criminal activities, gang desistance involves both the stopping of criminal activities *and* the leaving of the criminal peer group, which comes with its own unique challenges, such as pressure from gang peers to stay in the gang. Thus, it is important to develop a theory that is unique to gang desistance.

### **7.2.1 An integrated identity- and resilience-informed theory of gang desistance**

I argue that gang desistance encompasses two inter-related components that work together:

- (i) An identity transformation in which the individual moves away from being a gangster and embraces a prosocial identity position (the focus of Chapter Five)
- (ii) The drawing on of protective resources and prosocial identities in leaving or exiting the gang, and in maintaining a reformed lifestyle *after* having left the gang, in spite of the challenges or difficulties that these processes may present (the focus of Chapter Six).

While there are gang desistance studies that draw on identity theory - see for example Decker et al. (2014), and on resilience theory; for example, Albert (2008), to my knowledge, this is the first gang desistance study that integrates resilience and identity theoretical frameworks in its conceptualisation of desistance from gangsterism. Below I outline this theory, drawing on data from Chapters Five and Six, as well as linking my theory to existing gang desistance and resilience work where applicable.

#### **7.2.1.1 An emphasis on maintenance of reform, protective resources and agency**

A key tenet of the theory I propose is that, in my conceptualisation of the gang desistance process, I argue that it should encompass both exiting the gang life and maintaining a reformed lifestyle after exiting, which includes a focus on how challenges and

difficulties associated with exiting and maintaining reform are managed by the individual. While there is general agreement in much of the gang desistance literature that desistance should be viewed as a process of disengagement - as opposed to a single act; see for instance Pyrooz and Decker (2011) - there appears to be limited attention paid to *how* this process is maintained. One notable exception is the work of Berger et al. (2016), who, in their study on gang desistance amongst core gang members in San Francisco and Los Angeles, argue that the final stage in the process of desistance is that of maintenance. They acknowledge the difficulty in upholding the decision to cease gang-related activities and adopt a normative lifestyle, and propose that what helps gang members to achieve "final gang desistance" (p. 12) is finding steady and rewarding employment, volunteering in community organisations, re-connecting with loved ones, making new social contacts and engaging in spiritual activities. While this offers important insights into maintaining reform, it does not shed light on the challenges and difficulties associated with gang desistance, and how these are managed by the individual, which is particularly important to understand in the context of low- and middle-income countries like South Africa, where socioeconomic conditions like poverty, unemployment and inequality can impact the gang desistance process. The integrated resilience and identity informed theory that I propose in this study can fill this particular gap in the literature.

Resilience focuses on positive adaptation in the context of adversity (Masten, 2001, 2014). Adversity can include a range of stressors which means that resilience has a much wider application than desistance (Fitzpatrick, 2011) in that it can encompass not only desistance (including exiting the gang and the maintenance of reform after exiting), but also the challenges associated with these processes. One challenge faced by some of the participants in this study was a temptation to use drugs or re-engage in gang-related activities. Another challenge former gang members can face is finding legitimate employment. An important way in which participants were able to manage these challenges was through drawing on social support mechanisms in their environment, including practical and emotional support from loved ones and faith-based institutions.

Accordingly, another key aspect of the theory of gang desistance I advance is that desisting individuals must have access to protective resources in their environment that support their desistance, which includes supporting them in managing any difficulties they may face. This does not mean, however, that the individual is passive in this process - quite the opposite. In desisting from gang involvement the individual has agency in that he/she forms a purposive intention to change, actively draws on the protective resources available to

him/her and envisions and constructs a new identity that supports his/her desistance (King, 2013b; Ungar, 2008). Importantly, though, this process is not only an inner journey, but rather an interactive one in that it is shaped by the wider social context of the individual which determines the availability of new prosocial identities the desister can take up, and protective resources he/she can draw on (Chen et al., 2012; Farrall et al., 2011; Healy, 2014; Ungar, 2008). While there is some recognition in the gang desistance literature of the importance of conceptualising desistance as an interactional process – see for example, Søgaard et al. (2016) – thus far there appear to be no theoretical frameworks on desistance from gang involvement that focus specifically on the interaction between the individual and his/her environment in the desistance process. The theory proposed in this study aims to address this short-coming by highlighting the interactional nature of desisting from gangsterism. For example, while participants demonstrated control and choice in their desistance, they were also supported by resources in their environment that they actively drew on in the process of desistance, including social support from loved ones and key community figures. Another central protective resource for the participants was religion, which gave them a sense of meaning and purpose as well as an interpretative system from which to understand and make sense of the world and maintain a gang-free lifestyle. This may be of particular importance in a context like South Africa, where unemployment and poverty is high. In addition, the gangs themselves seem to have an inherent respect for religion and those who choose to exit the gang life for religious reasons.

Therefore, central to the theory of gang desistance that I propose is that desistance is an interactional process in which the individual has agency and actively draws on protective resources in his/her environment (like social and religious support) in desisting from gangsterism. Along with actively drawing on protective resources, the theory in this study also purports that desistance is also supported by prosocial identity positions taken up after disengaging from gangsterism, which will be explored in the following section.

### **7.2.1.2 An emphasis on identity**

As noted above, I argue that the process of gang desistance involves not only the drawing on of protective resources to support desistance (in which the individual has agency), but also a transformation in identity. This transformation is a gradual process (as opposed to a single event), punctuated with key turning points. Authors like Decker et al. (2014) and Densley and Pyrooz (2017) acknowledge this fluctuation between gangster and former gangster identities, particularly if an individual has persisting social and emotional ties with his gang. Fatherhood

acted as a key turning point that altered some of the participants' delinquent trajectories (Roman et al., 2017; Sampson & Laub, 2016). Turning points can also include adverse life events, such as incarceration (or the fear of incarceration; Roman et al., 2017), which applied to some of the participants in the current study and played a key role in their growing disillusionment with the gang life – another central aspect of the resilience and identity informed theory of gang desistance I put forward, and well-recognised in other gang desistance literature – see for example Bubolz and Simi (2015).

According to identity theory, disillusionment is a state of discontent or resentment which comes about when an individual's expectations of the gang - for example, as offering protection, a surrogate family or income - are not met, thereby decreasing the importance of the gang identity (Bubolz & Simi, 2015). For the participants in this study, the gang initially provided them with the resources to manage or adapt to difficult circumstances (for example, an absent father) by giving them a sense of belonging. Arguably, this could be an example of hidden resilience: Joining and being in the gang may have provided them with the resources to manage or adapt to difficult circumstances for a period of time. However, over time they became disillusioned with this sense of belonging, realising it was not real or it did not resonate with them anymore. Oftentimes this disillusionment arose as the result of a negative experience with the gang, which functioned as a turning point in redirecting their life trajectory away from gangsterism. This disillusionment was key in prompting the participants' decision to leave the gang life. After making this decision they actively drew on protective resources (such as social and religious support) that supported them in the process of leaving the gang and maintaining reform after having left, thus demonstrating a more conventional form of resilience.

While for most participants in this study disillusionment was key to their identity transformation (and thus their desistance), for some participants absolution through religion played a more pivotal role in their transformation, and is therefore another key aspect to the theory of gang desistance proposed in this study. It is important to emphasize though, that religion was central to *all* of the participants' stories of desistance. For those participants whose stories focused on absolution through religion in particular, specific religious experiences functioned as turning points in that they enabled them to feel absolved of crimes committed in their past, and thereby let go of their gangster identity, and embrace a new identity from which they were able make amends for past crimes.

A key outcome of this absolution is that participants experienced a profound emotional transformation, in that they moved from being hardened, stoic gangsters, to emotionally

sensitive and aware individuals. Importantly, while there is growing recognition of the role emotions and religion may play in desistance - see for example Hunter and Farrall (2017) and Maruna et al. (2006) - to the best of my knowledge this sense of absolution through religion and the resultant profound emotional transformation experienced by the participants in this study appears to be a novel contribution to the gang desistance literature.

The final key component of the resilience and identity informed theory of gang desistance I put forward, is that taking up prosocial identity positions can support the desistance process. While there is emphasis in some gang desistance research on the protective role prosocial identities can play in supporting desistance – see for example Berger et al. (2016) and Bubolz and Simi (2015) – limited attention has been paid to *how* these identities are supportive of desistance. I argue that they are supportive by providing protective resources to desisting individuals.

After exiting their gangs, the participants in this study distanced themselves from their past gangster identity and moved towards alternative, prosocial identities including becoming religious and being actively involved and caring father and husband figures and community figures who set a positive example to others through their reformed behaviour. These prosocial identities provided participants with a sense of meaning, responsibility and accountability - all of which acted as protective resources in supporting them in their desistance, which includes leaving the gang and maintaining reform.

### **7.2.1.3 Summary**

In conclusion, I propose that gang desistance can be well-understood through an identity-and resilience-informed theoretical framework. Within this framework, desistance is conceptualised as involving exiting the gang and maintaining a reformed lifestyle after exiting, in spite of the challenges and difficulties these processes may present. It is also seen as an interactive process: while the individual exercises agency in desisting from gangsterism, the environment of the individual needs to support and facilitate desistance. Key to the desistance process is (i) the drawing on of protective resources (such as social and religious support) and prosocial identities (for instance, a caring and involved father) that support desistance by providing further protective internal resources like meaning, purpose and accountability and (ii) an identity transformation in which the individual experiences disillusionment with the gang life and/or has an experience of absolution through religion which results in a profound emotional transformation.

Having proposed a unique theoretical framework for conceptualising desistance from gang involvement, I now turn to the practical implications of this study.

### **7.3. Practical implications**

International literature indicates that while there are a number of effective interventions for treating young offenders and other youth who display high levels of aggression or conduct problems (examples include Multisystemic Therapy, functional family therapy and Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (Henggeler & Schoenwald, 2011)), there are very few interventions that specifically target gang-involved youth (Boxer, Docherty, Ostermann, Kubik, & Veysey, 2017; Roman et al., 2017). This is problematic given the negative impact gangsterism has on gang members, and on wider society. Gang involvement is associated with a host of problems including drug dealing and substance use, school drop-out, economic hardship, serious violent offending, weapon possession and use, prostitution, teen pregnancy, poor mental health outcomes and increased risk for violent victimisation and death (Ang et al., 2012; B. Brown et al., 2014; Decker et al., 2013; Katz et al., 2011; Krohn et al., 2011; Prinsloo, 2013; Pyrooz et al., 2015; Standing, 2005; Ulloa et al., 2012; Weerman et al., 2015). Further, the harmful effects of gang involvement for youth appear to persist well into early adulthood (Boxer et al., 2017). In addition, the presence of gangs in communities causes constant fear and tension, with community members being intimidated into helping gang members with their illegal activities, as well as being exposed to gang violence on a regular basis (Mncube & Steinmann, 2014; Reckson & Becker, 2005; Standing, 2005; Ward, 2007). Thus, the design and implementation of effective interventions for gang-involved youth is imperative. Given the host of problems associated with gang involvement, these interventions need to be multifaceted in nature, focusing on multiple domains including, for example, the family and peer group of gang members. An example of a possible intervention is Multisystemic Therapy: In their evaluation of the use of Multisystemic Therapy with both gang and non-gang involved youth, Boxer et al. (2017) found an average re-arrest rate of 30 percent across participants (35 percent for gang-involved youth and 29 percent for non-gang delinquent youth), thus indicating the potential effectiveness of the intervention.

Given that this study focused on desistance from gang involvement the recommendations given below relate predominantly to intervening with gang-involved youth. However, I make some suggestions with regards to prevention of gang membership where applicable.

The data from this study, supported by gang and crime desistance literature - see for example, Pyrooz and Decker (2011), suggests that identity transformation (and thus, desistance) is best understood as a process that is punctuated by key turning points. These turning points can include both negative (for instance, a fear of incarceration) and positive (for example, embracing fatherhood) experiences. Importantly, desisting gang members need to experience these turning points as personally meaningful to them in that the turning point(s) prompts them to actively reflect on their gang life and to form a purposeful intention to make a change. Given the difficulty in determining when exactly turning points will resonate with a potential desister, and relatedly given that desistance is not a single event but rather a process that unfolds over time, it is important to offer interventions repeatedly and as much as possible.

Relatedly, youth who make a decision to exit the gang life need to be able to draw on protective resources within their environment that support them in bringing their intention to desist to fruition, and that help them to maintain this intention. For example, United States-based programmes like CureViolence, HomeBoys and Project BUILD (Building, Uplifting and Impacting Lives Daily) that work with exiting gang members offer resources such as establishing prosocial supportive networks, job readiness training, education and mental health assistance (Parker, Wilson, & Thomas, 2014; Roman et al., 2017). The potential desister's loved ones and family may be able to play a key role in the desistance process, as they may often be the first port of call when an individual decides to exit the gang life, as was the case for many of the participants in this study. This points to the importance of gang intervention programmes not only working with potential desisters, but with their families, too. Once an individual has decided to leave a gang, he/she is likely to face an array of challenges and difficulties (for instance, finding legitimate employment, feeling pressure to use drugs) and will therefore need a supportive network that offers practical and emotional support to help him/her to continue along a prosocial path and to resist any temptations or pressures to re-engage in crime and gang-related activities, or to use drugs. The families of desisting gang members need to be educated on these matters and equipped with the skills that help them to best to support the desister.

This kind of support need not only come from families: as the data in this study indicated, community figures such as pastors or probation officers can also play a supportive role to desisting gang members, offering them guidance and advice. Support services offered in the prison system, such as rehabilitation and education programmes, may also be able to play an important role in facilitating desistance, particularly given that prison can offer a

space for active reflection and questioning of one's life choices (McLean et al., 2017). However, intervention programmes in South African prisons (and in other contexts where there are prison gangs) need to be mindful of the powerful hold the Numbers gang has over the prison system. Those running interventions may want to consider offering services that are religious in nature, in light of the respect the gangs seem to have for religion.

Relatedly, given the key role that religion played in the participants' desistance process, interventions with gang-involved youth that are faith-based or that incorporate a faith-based element may be able to play a supportive role when it comes to desistance from gang involvement. In particular, a turn to religion can provide a sense of meaning and purpose, a sense of forgiveness for past crimes committed, an ability to express emotions and empathise with others and a "cognitive blueprint" for making sense of one's past and committing to a prosocial future.

Interventions with gang-involved youth may also want to encourage the values of personal responsibility-taking and independence amongst participants, while also being mindful of the context of the individual that may have led to their decision to join the gang in the first place. For the participants in the current study, it seems that the sense of belonging the gang could offer (at least for a period of time) when they did not feel cared for or loved by their parents, was a key motivating factor here. Thus, a possible intervention point in preventing gang involvement is to work with the parents of youth who may be considered at risk of joining gangs. Programmes can be offered to these parents that focus on strengthening their parenting skills, in particular skills that enable them to have warm, loving and nurturing relationships with their children.

Given that a desisting gang member may be attempting to stop drug use while exiting the gang life (as was the case with the majority of the participants in this study), gang intervention services should also include a focus on substance abuse rehabilitation, particularly in light of the fact that recovery from drug abuse can have a positive impact on desistance (Van Roeyen et al., 2016).

Lastly, intervention initiatives with gang-involved youth would benefit from including a focus on positive role modelling, given the sense of responsibility, accountability and meaning occupying a prosocial identity position can provide. For example, participants who are fathers (or soon to be fathers) could be offered a programme that focuses specifically on parenthood – what it means to be a caring, involved and committed father. Further, participants could be provided with opportunities to give back to their communities by, for example, working with high risk youth

#### **7.4 Limitations and recommendations for future research**

While this study presents a number of beneficial practical and theoretical implications, it is not without limitations. A limitation of all qualitative research is that it generally works with small sample sizes and thus, the findings of qualitative studies may not necessarily be applicable to the wider population (Willig, 2008). Therefore, the narratives shared by this group of former gang members may not be the same for other former gang members. Of particular importance here is noting that eleven of the participants were recruited through a faith-based organisation, and the twelfth (who was recruited through NICRO) was affiliated with a church in the community. While the approach of the organisation from which the majority of the participants were recruited is largely secular, it does have religious elements and religion indeed seemed to play a pivotal role in the participants' stories of desistance. Further, through this organisation (and through the church that one of the participants was affiliate with) the participants could access a particular set of supportive resources, including employment. In addition, the motto of the Centre is "change is possible" which seemed to play a role in the participants' stories of desistance, particularly as it related to their ability to develop a sense of control and choice. It would thus be worthwhile to study the narratives of former gang members in South Africa who are not affiliated to faith-based institutions, and thus may not have been exposed to a particular set of beliefs or had access to protective resources such as employment.

In addition to being affiliated with faith-based institutions, the majority of the participants engaged in generative activities. This was not part of my pre-determined criteria for participation in this study, but is rather something that emerged in my findings. While not necessarily a limitation, it would be worthwhile exploring the narratives of former gang members who do not engage in generative activities.

It is also worth highlighting that across this group of participants the average length of gang membership was 7.9 years. This is substantially longer than the average reported in international literature which notes that most individuals are involved in a gang for less than one year Carson & Vecchio, 2015). Thus, these participants' experiences may well be different to those who have been involved in a gang for a shorter period of time. However, it is also important to note that in the context of South Africa (and other low- to middle-income countries) longer gang membership may reflect a difficulty in desisting in a context of poverty, high rates of unemployment and social inequality.

While consideration was given to including female participants in this study (particularly in light of the growing awareness of female gang members – see for example (De La Rue & Espelage, 2014)), a decision was made to focus exclusively on male former gang members. This decision was informed by practical considerations: male participants were significantly easier to come by than female participants. It would be useful in the future to conduct research with former female gang members in South Africa to determine whether there are any differences across the genders in terms of desistance from gang involvement.

### **7.5 Concluding remarks**

This study has provided an in-depth look into an under-explored phenomenon in South Africa (and other low- and middle-income countries): desistance from gang involvement. Given the prevalence of gang involvement in South Africa, and the negative impact of gangsterism on gang members and wider society, this is an important gap to fill.

This study also offers an integrated identity and resilience informed theory of gang desistance, thus providing a theoretical framework that is specific to gang (as opposed to crime) desistance – an area which is in need of development, particularly with regards to gang desistance in low- and middle-income countries. This theory shows that that desistance from gang involvement involves two interrelated components: (i) a process of identity transformation in which the individual - usually as a result of a sense of disillusionment with the brotherhood the gang purports to offer, and sometimes as a result of a process of absolution through religion - intentionally moves away from the gangster identity (where one is expected to be hard, stoic and tough) towards a prosocial identity (where religion is embraced and one can be a positive role model to the family and in the community) ; and (ii) the drawing on of protective resources (for example, social support from one's family as well as support from religious belief systems) and prosocial identities (for example, that of a caring father) that support leaving the gang and maintaining reform after having left the gang, in spite of the challenges or difficulties (for example, finding legitimate employment) these processes may present.

This study has also shown that desistance from gang involvement is best understood as an interactive process: while the individual exercises agency in actively drawing on protective resources that support desistance, the environment of the individual needs to enable and facilitate this process. Thus, it is imperative that interventions that assist desisting gangsters are targeted not only on an individual level, but a contextual level too, ensuring that

individuals have access to the kinds of protective resources in their environment that will support their desistance.

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<sup>28</sup> I have taken out the name of the suburb in order to ensure complete anonymity. See section 4.7 for a more detailed discussion on anonymising the data in this study.

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## APPENDIX A: ETHICAL CLEARANCE LETTER



UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

## FACULTY OF HUMANITIES - CANDIDATURE FORM

DC: HUM /

DOCTORATE (A research proposal must accompany this form)	RESEARCH MASTERS (A research proposal must accompany this form)	C/W MASTERS
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**SECTION A:** (To be completed by candidate)

Surname	KELLY	First Name(s)	JANE
Title	Mr	Ms	Mrs
Address	16 Richmond Rd Newlands 7700		
Telephone/Home	021 794 7012	Work/Cell	071 70 2105

Note: Your UCT Email address is the default email address for all official communication – make sure that you access it regularly.

Department: Psychology

Title of Dissertation: Narratives of gang joining and desistance  
 Amongst former gang members

## Qualifications held:

Degree/Diploma	Major(s) & Subjects	Month/Year awarded	University
Master's	Research Psychology	2015	UCT
Honours	Psychology	2011	UCT
B.Sc.Sci	Law and Psychology	2010	UCT

Signature of candidate:  Date: 14.09.15

**SECTION B:** (To be completed by HOD & Dean) The above-mentioned applicant has been accepted as a PhD / Masters candidate.

	Name	Signature	Date
Supervisor	C. L. WARDE		14/09/2015
Co-supervisor			
HOD	M. S. L. WARDE		14/09/2015
Deputy-Dean: Research			
Ethics approval obtained where applicable	on behalf of Departmental Ethics Comm.		14/09/2015

g/l/g/h/u/t/m/s approval of proposal

## APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHICS AND GANG INFORMATION OF PARTICIPANTS

	<b>Age at first interview</b>	<b>Employment status</b>	<b>Marital status</b>	<b>Past drug abuse</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b>Street gang membership</b>	<b>Prison gang membership</b>	<b>Length of time former gang member</b>
<b>P1</b>	24	Unemployed but completing Seamans course	Married	Yes	1 child, 2 stepchildren	Six years (16 yrs to 22 yrs)	No	One year nine months
<b>P2</b>	26	Employed as a monitor at rehabilitation centre	Engaged	Yes	1 child	Seven years (16 yrs to 23 yrs)	No	One year four months
<b>P3</b>	25	Seasonal work with the Kaapse Klopse (an annual Minstrel festival in Cape Town)	In relationship	Yes	None	Seven years (16 yrs to 23 yrs)	No	One year seven months
<b>P4</b>	44	Employed as violence interrupter with gang intervention programme	Married	No	7 children	Sixteen years (15/16 yrs to 29 yrs)	No	Sixteen years
<b>P5</b>	27	Studying film and media	Single	No	None	Thirteen years (12/13 yrs to 25 yrs)	Yes	One year six months
<b>P6</b>	32	Construction work and church work	In relationship	Yes	None	Thirteen years (16 yrs to 28 yrs)	Yes	Four years
<b>P7</b>	32	Public educator for gang intervention programme	Engaged	Yes	2 children	Seven years (15 yrs to 22 yrs)	No	Ten years
<b>P8</b>	25	Self-employed - part time work selling clothes	Single	Yes	None	Ten years (13 yrs to 23 yrs)	Yes	Two years
<b>P9</b>	30	Employed as outreach worker for gang intervention programme	In relationship	Yes	None	Seven years (18 yrs to 22 yrs)	No	Seven years

<b>P10</b>	45	Employed as outreach worker for gang intervention programme	Married	Yes	1 child, 2 stepchildren	Nineteen years (16 yrs to 35 yrs)	Yes	Ten years
<b>P11</b>	55	Employed part time by high school and church	Married	No	3 children	Seven years (14 yrs to 23 yrs), and then Eight years (31 yrs to 39 yrs)	No	Seventeen years
<b>P12</b>	62	Employed as violence interrupter for gang intervention programme	Married	Yes	5 children	Twenty five years (14 yrs to 39 yrs)	Yes	Twenty three years

## APPENDIX C: TELEPHONIC SCRIPT

Hello, my name is Jane Kelly and I am a student from the Psychology Department at the University of Cape Town doing research on gangsterism in your community. I wondered if I could tell you a bit about my study over the phone and, if you are still interested, we could set up an interview time and date.

My research study aims to look at gangsterism from the viewpoint of those who used to be involved in gangs, and also from the viewpoint of other people in the community. If you decide to participate in this study then I would interview you at the Centre, two separate times during the next 5 to 6 months. These interviews would last roughly 1.5 hours, would be recorded (if you agree), and would focus on your life history. There are no right or wrong answers in the interviews – I'm just interested in hearing about your experiences, and how you got to where you are today. The interview offers you a chance to share your stories, your thoughts and your opinions.

All the information that I get from you in these interviews will be kept strictly confidential and anonymous: I won't use your real name in my study, and the interview recording and transcripts will be stored safely on a password protected computer. To thank you for participating in my study I will give you a R20 Shoprite gift voucher for each interview, giving a total of R40 for the two interviews.

Do you have any questions you'd like to ask? Are you still interested in being interviewed?

*I will answer any questions the participant may have and if they are still willing to participate I will ask them the following:*

Great! Could we arrange our first interview time and date, according to what works best for your personal and work schedule?

*Once we have decided on a time and date for the interview I will note it down.*

Thank you very much! I will call you the day before to remind you about our interview I'm looking forward to meeting you!

## APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM

### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Department of Psychology University of Cape Town



#### **Study Purpose**

You are invited to participate in a research study about gangsterism in your community. I am a student from the Department of Psychology at the University of Cape Town.

#### **Study Procedures**

What will you be asked to do?: You will need to meet with me twice over six months at the Centre to be interviewed for roughly 1.5 hours each time. The interviews will focus on your life history and experiences, and how you got to where you are today. These interviews will be tape recorded.

#### **Privacy and confidentiality**

I will keep the information I get from you in this interview strictly confidential. Your name and this consent form will be kept separate from the interview information and will also be kept locked in a filing cabinet. When the interviews are transcribed and reported on, I will use made up names for you, your community and any friends and family members you talk about, so that anyone reading reports I write or coming to presentations about the study, won't be able to figure out who you are.

Only myself and my supervisor will have access to the interview information (including the recording, transcription and cardboard with your life history timeline on it). The interview recordings and transcriptions will also be stored on a password protected computer, and the cardboard timelines will be locked in a filing cabinet. After the recordings have been listened to they will be deleted and after the information on the pieces of cardboard have been reported on they will be destroyed. In any reports or presentations on this research that are published your identity will still be kept confidential.

If we discuss any criminal activities that you may have been involved in, or that you plan to be involved in, please don't give me with any specific details (such as the time and place).

### **Voluntary Participation**

Doing these interviews with me is voluntary. You do not have to answer a question if you do not want to, and if you decide to participate, you are free to change your mind and stop the interviews at any time. Whether you decide to be interviewed, your decision will not affect your relationship with the Centre.

### **Possible Risks**

During the interviews you might have ideas or thoughts that make you upset, anxious or angry. You might also feel uncomfortable or embarrassed talking about some parts of your life. If this happens you are welcome to take a break or stop the interview without any negative consequences. You are also welcome to talk to Ursula Engel on 021 692 1929 or 0738162940 who manages the counselling team at the Centre, or you could contact the local clinic on 021 692 1250 and ask to see the psychologist there.

These interviews will also take time out of your personal and work schedule, but we will arrange times that are most convenient for you.

### **Possible Benefits**

While there are no direct benefits to you in being interviewed for this study, you are given an opportunity to share your views and experiences. My hope is that information from these interviews will be of use to the Centre and the programmes they run. And that this information could be used to help other young people involved in gangs.

### **Compensation**

To thank you for taking part in this study, you will be given a R20 Shoprite gift voucher at the end of each interview.

### **Questions**

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about the study you can contact me on 072 142 7161, or [phdresearchstudy2015@gmail.com](mailto:phdresearchstudy2015@gmail.com) or my supervisor on 021 650 3422 or [Catherine.Ward@uct.ac.za](mailto:Catherine.Ward@uct.ac.za).

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, comments or complaints about the study you can also contact the Research Ethics Committee, Department of Psychology, University of Cape Town, on 021 650 3417.

\* \* \*

*I have read the above and am satisfied with my understanding of the study and its possible benefits, risks and inconveniences. My questions about the study have been answered. I voluntarily consent to participation in the research study as described, and know that I am free to withdraw this consent at any time, and that doing so will not cause me any penalty. I have been offered copies of this three-page consent form.*

---

Signature of participant

---

Date

---

Name of participant (printed)

---

Signature of researcher

\* \* \*

This series of interviews will be recorded in order for them to be transcribed. The only people who will listen to these recording is myself and my supervisor. Until they listen to them, they will be stored on a password-protected computer. After they have listened to and transcribed them, they will be destroyed.

*I agree that this series of interviews can be recorded.*

---

Signature of participant

---

Date

---

Name of participant (printed)

---

Signature of researcher

## APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

### **Interview 1**

Hi there! I'd like to start by saying thank you for giving up your time to do this series of interviews with me - I really appreciate it. My name is Jane and I'm a student from the psychology department at the University of Cape Town. My research study focuses on gangsterism in your community. Before we get started properly, I'd like to run through the finer details of my study and also the consent form with you. I have two copies of the consent form, one which you can take away with you and one which I will take home with me once you have signed it.

For this study I would like to interview you twice – once now, and a second time in roughly a month. During these interviews I am going to ask you to share your life story with me, and how you got to where you are today. There are no right or wrong answers in these interviews - I'm interested in hearing about your thoughts and your experiences.

Each of the interviews will last roughly 1 to 1.5 hours and they will be recorded with your consent. After this, these recordings will be written up and then erased. Only myself and my supervisor will have access to these recordings and write up, and they will be stored on a password-protected computer. I will also be using made up names in these write-ups and in my research report, for you, your community and any friends or family members you talk about in your interviews. I will be keeping your name and consent form in a locked filing cabinet, completely separate from my research report, so there will be no way of linking you to the interview. In other words, these interviews are strictly confidential. In any reports or presentations on this research that are published, your identity will still be kept confidential.

We may talk about criminal activities which you were involved in or that you might be involved in in the future, If we do, then please don't provide me with any specific details (such as the time or place).

Participating in this research study is completely voluntary, and if you don't want to answer any of my questions, or if you want to stop or withdraw from the study you are welcome to do so and this in no way will be held against you, nor will it have any negative consequences for your relationship with the Centre.

It is possible that some of the things you talk about today and in the following two interviews might make me feel upset, angry or embarrassed. If this does happen you are free to stop the interview. I have also provided you with contact details for Ursula Engel who runs the counselling programme here at the Centre, as well as the contact details for the local clinic.

While there aren't any direct benefits to you in being interviewed for this study, you are given an opportunity to share your views and experiences. My hope is that the information from these interviews will be useful to the Centre and the programmes they run. And that this information could be used to help other young people involved in gangs.

To thank you for taking part in this study, I will give you a R20 Shoprite gift voucher at the end of each interview, giving a total of R40 for the two interviews.

Would you like to take a few minutes to read through the consent form yourself and see if you have any questions?

*Participant is given a few minutes to go through the consent form*

Is everything clear to you? Do you have any questions you'd like to ask?

*Participant is given an opportunity to ask questions*

Ok. Well if you don't have any (other) questions, would you please sign the consent form? Signing the first part means that you voluntarily agree to take part in the study and that you are free to withdraw this consent at any time. Signing the second part means that you agree to these interviews being tape recorded.

Thank you. I'm going to switch the tape recorder on now and we can get started with the interview.

In this series of interviews I'm interested in hearing about your life and your experiences, and how you got to where you are today. I have this big piece of cardboard with me which I thought we could use to construct a timeline of your life, starting from when and where you were born, right up until the present. *I will draw a long line horizontally across the board and place it between the two of us.*

So, could you start by telling me about where and when you were born?

*I will note these details down on the piece of cardboard. I will then move on to facilitating discussion on the participant's childhood. Depending on what sort of information the participant shares, and/or feels comfortable discussing, questions such as the following will be asked:*

- Could you tell me about your family and home life?
- Could you tell me about your primary/high schooling experiences?
- What was it like for you growing up in \_\_\_\_? What was the neighbourhood like?
- Could you tell me about your friends at that time?

*Importantly, these questions – as well as those listed in the rest of this schedule - serve as a guide to facilitate discussion and the participant will be given the freedom to steer the interview in the direction they choose. They may choose to not relay their stories in chronological order, and rather jump between different periods of their lives. While they are talking I will note down key events or transitions on the cardboard, all the while asking for more detail where it is needed.*

*If they have difficulty answering any questions at any point during the interview or in keeping their story going, I will also make use of probe questions such as "Where did all of this*

begin?”; “What was happening in your life at that time?”; “Can you tell me a little bit more about that” and “Can you explain what you mean by that?”.

*Once the participant has discussed his childhood and adolescence in sufficient detail I will move onto asking him about his post-schooling experiences, if he has not begun discussing this already. The following types of questions will be asked:*

- Could you tell me about what happened in your life when you left school/finished school/dropped out of school?
- What sort of experiences did you have with your friends/peers at that time?
- Could you tell me about any partners you had at this time and what those relationships were like?
- *If the participant is a parent:* What was it like becoming a father?

*At this point, or perhaps sooner, it is possible that the participant will start discussing his involvement with crime or gang-related activities (and perhaps also substance use or abuse), if he is comfortable doing so. If this happens, the following types of questions will be asked:*

- Could you tell me about your experiences around becoming involved in a gang?
- What else was going on in your life at that time?
- Could you tell me about your experience of being a gang member?

*These questions are likely to lead into a discussion of their leaving of a gang. When this happens the following types of questions will be asked:*

- Could you tell me about your experiences around leaving the gang?
- What was that like and what else was going on in your life at that time?

*At this point the participant may start discussing how he got to where he is today. If this happens, the following sorts of questions will be asked:*

- Could you tell me about what is happening in your life at the moment?
- What are your current experiences?

*If I get the impression that the participant has discussed everything he wants to, I will start bringing the interview to a close:*

Are there any other things you would like to discuss, or questions you would like to ask?

*Once any questions or comments have been addressed I will close the interview.*

Thank you very much for sharing your stories with me today. I wonder if we can set up a time and date for our next interview.

*At this point I will also give them the gift voucher, and turn off the tape recorder once the interview has finished.*

## Interview 2

Hello. Thank you for meeting with me again for this second interview. Today I have some follow up questions from your last interview that I would like to ask you, and I would also like to use this time as an opportunity for you to raise any thoughts you might have had since the last time we met, or to clarify any points you made. A reminder that this interview should not last longer than 1.5 hours, it will be tape recorded, and you are free to pause or stop the interview at any point. I have brought along the consent form you signed at the last interview, in case you want to look through it again. I have also brought along the piece of cardboard with your timeline which we can refer to, and make changes to if needed.

*The participant will be given an opportunity to read through the consent form and raise any questions or concerns he may have. Thereafter I will switch on the tape recorder and begin the interview.*

*This interview acts as a follow-up from the previous interview and I will accordingly be guided by the following sorts of questions:*

- Last time we met you told me about \_\_\_\_\_ I wonder if you could give me a bit more detail on that experience?
- I wonder if you could clarify what you meant by \_\_\_\_\_?
- Could you tell me more about \_\_\_\_\_?
- What did you mean exactly when you said \_\_\_\_\_?
- What was that experience like for you?
- Could you tell me more about what you were feeling or what was going on in your life at that particular time?

*Once these follow up questions have been addressed the participant will be given an opportunity to raise any other thoughts he may have:*

Is there anything else that you would like to discuss with me? Any thoughts that you had since we last spoke, or anything we did not discuss that you would like to talk about now?

*The participant will be given an opportunity to answer these questions.*

Thank you very much for talking with me again today, I really appreciate it.

*At this point I will give them the gift voucher and switch off the tape recorder when the interview finishes.*

## APPENDIX F: VISUAL EXAMPLE OF CODING IN NVIVO

The screenshot shows the NVivo 12 Pro software interface. The top menu bar includes File, Home, Import, Create, Explore, Share, and Node Tools. The Node Tools tab is selected, displaying various coding and analysis functions. On the left, a sidebar labeled 'Folders' shows a list of nodes with columns for Name, Files, and References. The main workspace displays three examples of coded text from different files, each with a reference count and coverage percentage.

Name	Files	References
Academic strength	10	15
Accountability	2	2
Actively turning to others for su	7	11
Back and forth in changing proc	14	33
Being a father or getting marrie	11	23
Being controlled by gangsterism	7	14
Being smart in the gang	4	7
Benefit of leaving gang	3	6
Change in behaviour	10	22
Change in relationship with pare	13	16
Clean or changed or religious id	11	32
Close relationship with mother	7	7
Co construction of meaning	7	7
Contrasting findings	7	12
Crying	6	7
Dreams of a positive life path as	5	7
Drug use or gangsterism changi	10	11
Experiences in gang program	2	4
Exposure to domestic violence a	7	11
Exposure to gangsterism throug	11	27

**Wanting to be a role model for fa** [1,56% Coverage]

I can walk from, from last year, from last year when I smoking drugs from last year ne, I'm now, long clean, from last year now (JK: Mmm). I cannot sleep by the house, so the Americans come there, they knock on my door, sommer, I thinking yoaw, is this really me, because I thinking yoaw, where's the brothers from the laughing boys? My brothers now, the gangsterism brothers, where's the brothers? They come shoot me at my house man (JK: Mmm), where's the brothers? So I thinking I go sleep one day, I see (?) my brothers, my sisters, I'm the big I'm the eldest, they must grow up man. I don't want to, seker don't want to my brothers um, footsteps, my footsteps man.

**<Files\\Participant 3 Interview 1>** - 5 1 reference coded [1,56% Coverage]

**Reference 1 - 1,56% Coverage**

I want to be a motivation for my brothers and sisters, (JK: Mmm), and with the role model, and I wanna be a role model outside there, for the others. I just sitting with that problem, but my father is now going to the court and make a case (JK: Mmm) and the court can send him to the rehab.

**<Files\\Participant 3 Interview 2>** - 5 1 reference coded [0,89% Coverage]

**Reference 1 - 0,89% Coverage**

And when, when I'm in a problem or, like in a conflict man (JK: Mhmm), I like to walk away from it. I like to walk away (JK: I see). Because why, the moment I still standing there and dinguse, then all

**<Files\\Participant 4 Interview 2>** - 5 1 reference coded [2,99% Coverage]

**Reference 1 - 2,99% Coverage**

Enter node name (CTRL+Q)

JK 70 Items Files: 9 References: 12 Unfiltered 100%