The effect of becoming a parent on disengagement from gangs

A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Humanities

2015

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Word count: 75,040
Abstract

The University of Manchester

Natalia Lemanska, Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The effect of becoming a parent on disengagement from gangs

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The purpose of this study was to shed more light on the process of desistance from crime in the context of disengagement from youth gangs and to do so in relation to a key life-event: parenthood. Gang membership was theorised in the light of a life-course framework and gang disengagement was defined as a renunciation of a gang status and gradually decreasing gang embeddedness. The likelihood of parenthood serving as a trigger of change in gang membership was investigated.

The study utilised data from narrative interviews with 15 inner-London parents who all self-reported as former gang members. Interview transcripts were further analysed by means of a hybrid process of inductive and deductive thematic analysis. This examined (1) subjective experiences of parenthood, (2) the effect of parenthood on renegotiation of the gang member identity and (3) whether there were any substantial differences between how fathers and mothers embraced their parenthood experience.

With regard to the course of behavioural and identity changes, there was no one, single pattern that would have reflected all parents’ journeys out of gangs. There were considerable intra- and inter-gender differences with regard to when the transformation process started, how deep the changes were with respect to core-self and to what extent parents were engaging in reflective, meaning-making processes. Parents also demonstrated different levels of resilience in the face of challenges and varied in how much commitment, and pro-activity they were channeling into the future-oriented endeavours. The experience of being a gang member gradually became an aversive one for most parents and they generally appraised the meaning of conventional life.

The volatility of new parenthood as a possible turning point in the life of a young gang member denotes it as a timely occasion when assistance could be provided. Based on parents’ accounts, several recommendations were proposed that, if implemented on a wider scale, are likely to increase the chance of parents enacting their parental roles successfully. These included: a single case management approach that is long-term, affords flexibility if circumstances change and, due to the multifaceted character of young people’s needs, demands effective partnership between different agencies.

Though parenthood was not a universal remedy, becoming a parent served as an important catalyst for self-transformation and gang disengagement for the majority of the interviewed young parents. The overall success appeared to be strongly intertwined with one’s level of agency, support from pro-social others and perception of availability of a legitimate identity.
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I thank my parents for their support, love and continuous encouragement. Yes, this journey has been long and I know that seeing your only daughter spending most of the time typing on the keyboard has not necessarily been your idea of “daughter-coming-home” time but you have stood by me all the way. Like you had ever before and like you would again if I decided to write a yet another PhD. Thank you and I love you dearly.

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Anyone, who has one way or the other lent me a helping hand in this journey deserves “thank you” including God who has given me health, energy and stamina to finish this journey.

I now leave you to what has come out of it.
The Author

Natalia Lemanska began her higher education in 2005 at the University of Warsaw in Poland reading for two degrees: Psychology and Law. In her third year, she transferred to the University of St Andrews in Scotland to gain international exposure. There, in 2010, she graduated with an MA (Hons) in Psychology. She then went on to study for the MPhil degree in Criminological Research at the University of Cambridge, which she completed in 2011. It was there, where she developed her research interest in youth offending and desistance from crime, and decided to embark on her PhD journey at the Centre for Criminology and Criminal Justice in the School of Law at The University of Manchester. On the side of her PhD, she took great pleasure in teaching first- and third-year undergraduate students in Criminology.
Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 The scale of the problem

It has only been in the past 15 years that researchers, police and policy makers eventually admitted that the problem of youth gangs does indeed exist in the UK. Sharp, Aldridge and Medina (2006) reported that up to 6% of 10-19-year-olds in England and Wales belonged to a gang. In 2008, Metropolitan Police estimated the number of gangs in London to be at least 171 (Centre for Social Justice, 2009). The Home Affairs Committee (2009) stated that in London, there was “a proportionally higher number of gangs” and that “the sheer number of postcode areas which young people often associate themselves with” resulted in formation of “natural geographical boundaries and generated a greater sense of territorialism”. According to more recent police data, in the financial year 2014/2015, more than 1,910 gang members were arrested in London and the combined length of jail sentences for gang-related crimes exceeded 1,418 years.¹

The issue that remains, however, is that at least some of these figures may not necessarily convey the real picture. Those involved in tackling gangs are not in unanimous agreement with regard to an operational definition of a “gang”. Even though research data and media accounts imply that the issue has been posing increasing concern especially in London, many of the wide-scale assessments of gang membership are often futile and our awareness of the real scope of the gang problem in the UK is partial at best. Therefore, any discourse pertaining to gangs’ prevalence, their involvement in illicit activities and so on naturally needs to commence with stating what “a gang” means and why in the first place gangs merit to be the area of prime focus for researchers.

1.2 What is a gang?

It is quite extraordinary that despite the contemporary preoccupation with youth ‘gangs’ in the UK and elsewhere, the existing literature reveals little consensus about precisely what constitutes a ‘gang’, how and why ‘gangs’ originate and/or the purpose and function that ‘gangs’ are thought to serve. (Goldson, 2011, p.9)

The quote above is a good encapsulation of the lack of agreement amongst the researchers on what actually does constitute a youth gang. One might almost say that there are as many operational definitions trying to capture the essence of the problem as there are gang researchers in the field (e.g., Densley, 2013; Hallsworth and Young, 2008). The “Eurogang definition” according to which, a gang is any “durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of their group identity” captures the essence of the “gang” (Klein and Maxson, 2006) and is frequently used in gang research, hence my decision to apply it in this study. However, to make it more stringent and following in the footsteps of other researchers whose gang studies have been based in the UK and including Densley (2013), Grund and Densley (2012), and Sharp et al. (2006), I have added one additional criterion, that is, a “gang” had to have at least one structural feature (name/ area etc.)

Regardless of these definitional differences and their multi-faceted interpretation, White (2013, p.2) stated that research on gangs explored “real, existing problems.” Gangs are clearly regarded to be negative entities and have got an increased media and policy attention since London Riots in 2011 when the Prime Minister David Cameron proclaimed “a concerted, all-out war on gangs and gang culture” (cited in Hallsworth, 2013, p.98). UK-based researchers have been arguing against the turmoil created by the media whilst at the same time joining efforts with communities to build evidence-based knowledge on youth groups that have the defining features of a gang (Aldridge, Medina, and Ralphs, 2008; Bullock and Tilley, 2008; Mares, 2001). Myself, I do not want to contribute either to further demonization but instead wish to demonstrate how young people in this study used the new life experience to re-evaluate their membership in a gang.

1.3 Why study gangs and parenthood?

During the last twenty years, research on gangs has burgeoned and with the presence of gangs virtually anywhere in the world, a more intellectually informed recognition is occurring (Decker and Weerman, 2005; Klein, Weerman, and Thornberry, 2006). Similarly to American studies, the majority of research on gangs in other parts of the world has concentrated on the issues such as how common the problem is, how gangs are organised, who and why joins them, and how gang membership relates to involvement in crime (Krohn and Thornberry, 2008). For a very long time, risk factors for gang membership have been of prime focus for researchers as compared to the motives behind gang
desistance. The main reason why we have witnessed research on gang desistance progressing at such a relatively slow pace is the perpetual problem of how to adequately operationalise the definition of both “desistance” and a “gang”. It can be very difficult to point out unambiguously when an individual has, beyond doubt, terminated the criminal career as much as it is often very challenging to establish with certainty whether a given group is a gang (Kazemian, 2007; Piquero, Farrington, and Blumstein, 2007). The issue of disengagement from gangs had been completely out of focus for many years. Sources of knowledge on gang desistance had been mainly: ethnography (most often non-participant), secondary accounts and literature reviews (Vigil, 2002). Active exploration of disengagement from gangs is thus fairly recent and the qualitative and contextualised approach to disengagement, which I take in my study, particularly in relation to parenthood, remains highly novel.

1.4 What is desistance?

The life-course approach has compelled researchers in Criminology to put the complex trajectories of human behaviour and change under close scrutiny. A life-course approach normally looks at three discrete phases with regard to one’s criminal career: onset, persistence and desistance. The trajectory of involvement in gangs supposedly also fits this pattern as young people join gangs, establish their status within a gang, take part in gang actions and then the majority of them eventually exit the gang (Hill, Lui, and Hawkins, 2001; Peterson, Taylor, and Esbensen, 2004). It is commonly accepted that desistance should not merely be looked at as a momentous single event which puts a stop to one’s further involvement in offending, but should rather be envisioned as a process of gaps in and reversions to a criminal career (Maruna, 2001). For desistance to have a high chance of success, one needs both a sense of subjective agency as well as relevant social triggers (e.g. becoming a parent) that encourage desistance and make it a viable life alternative in the eyes of an individual. Consequently, a growing desire to live this different life is acted upon proactively and the identity change occurs (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). Once the individual has internalised the reworked identity and is now an “ex-offender”, we can properly speak of “secondary” (that is, permanent) desistance. Recently (e.g., McNeill, 2014), the idea of “tertiary” desistance has also emerged, which would entail social recognition of the individual’s change.

Bearing in mind the substantial facilitation effect of gang membership on both delinquent
behaviour and victimisation, it is essential for researchers and practitioners to study the problem of gang desistance in depth. Due to the fact that so much attention has been drawn to gangs’ involvement in criminal behaviour, it is quite hard to envisage what life may be like beyond the very context of a gang. For instance, what impact do important life events such as getting married or becoming a parent induce on gang member’s life? I hypothesise that becoming a parent tends to promote desistance by triggering behavioural and identity changes, but this link is dependent on parents’ attitudes towards parenthood and the quality of relationship they have with their children, especially if a parent does not live with the child/ children. When living together with a child, this, at least in principle, implies a change in routine activities and this transition into a new role with new responsibilities, priorities and new daily routines is likely to have a transformative effect on the individual’s sense of identity. The same process of change is less likely to occur if the parent and the child live apart from the very beginning as this naturally puts logistical limitations on an unrestrained contact with a child, and parental understanding of his/ her responsibilities then tends to vary quite significantly. However, living separately but embracing parenthood positively and experiencing it as gratifying may also foster the adoption of a conventional identity, and eventually lead to sustained desistance.

Giordano, Schroeder and Cernkovich (2007) demonstrated that being in an intimate relationship (either married or non-married) was not significantly linked to changes in criminal behaviour but being “happy” with that relationship was. We can hypothesise that the similar effect occurs for parenthood. A substantial amount of research (e.g., Conger and Simons, 1997) is in favour of the principle that the time spent on a certain activity is proportionate in its amount to the reinforcement an individual gets from it. Therefore, if a parent is drawn to the rewards that being a parent gives him/ her, the reinforcement coming from relations with gang peers will be seen as less inviting and the emergence of a new self or a script as the “movement from a hell raiser to a family man” becomes possible (Hill, 1971 cited in Sampson, Laub, and Wimer, 2006, p.498).

Last but not least, one should never confuse disengagement from a gang with desistance from crime. The first one is theorised as an act of de-identification with one’s gang (i.e. not considering oneself as a part of the group any longer) and the accompanying gradual process of cutting down the embeddedness in a gang (i.e. weakening the links). Desistance from crime, on the other hand, implies a process of transition from offending to non-offending and maintenance of this state. Disengaging from a gang means less exposure to
criminal peers, a chance for finding viable alternatives and thus structuring one’s routine activities, which consequently builds the potential for desistance. This potential may but does not necessarily have to be acted upon and how successful an individual is markedly depends on the availability of tailored support, presence of social others and environmental triggers.

1.5 My mission

The over-arching research question explored in the thesis is:

How did the experience of becoming parents lead a sample of inner-London and gang-involved young adults to wish to disengage from a gang and what social and cognitive processes defined disengagement?

In order to address it, I investigate narrative data from interviews with fifteen young mothers and young fathers self-reporting as former gang members in order to shed some light on the processes via which early parenthood may impact on the individual’s transformation and self-development. The interviews afford the chance to look into the young parents’ efforts of perseverance and resilience as they are striving to get over their turbulent pasts and to secure a better life for themselves and their children. All of the interviewed young parents had experienced substantial hardships in their lives namely domestic abuse, being raised in a single-mother household and poverty. Some interviewees had not been through the criminal justice system yet they had all engaged in criminal behaviours whilst in a gang.

We know that gang membership itself is a risk factor for teenage parenthood (Thornberry et al., 2003, p.169) but this is just a statement. The process and context of parenthood for young gang members has been massively underexplored. In particular, we need to know more about how becoming a parent affects gang membership and vice versa, that is, how being in a gang impacts on parental responsibilities. Although there is some research available with regard to personal narratives of young mothers (Borkowski et al., 2007; Leadbeater and Way, 2001) and young fathers (e.g., Moloney at al., 2009), and their children, this study is the first one in which there is a focus on the development of identity in the context of personal transformation for both mothers and fathers from a comparative perspective.
I explore both desistance from a gang status (behavioural change) and psychological, and emotional changes (reworking self-identity and reflecting on self). I advocate that for young adult parents with histories of gang membership, beneficial changes are likely to follow from embracing parenthood in a positive way. I uncover what effect parenthood has on deciding whether to persist in or to disengage from gang life. What is the impact of gang membership on parenthood and vice versa? How do the young men find the way between the worlds which are assumed to be at the two ends of the spectrum: the standard of masculinity inherent to their gang membership and responsible, paternal behaviour? How do the young females handle the limitations that pregnancy naturally imposes on their hitherto risky lifestyle and how do they juggle parental responsibilities and gang membership if they do not decide to disengage?

The analysis also enhances our understanding of the current provision of support for young people involved/ at risk of joining gangs (in particular those who are parents) and offers valuable contribution regarding how this can be further improved.

1.6 Thesis Outline

The following two Chapters make up the Literature Review. In Chapter Two, I elaborate on the theoretical framework informing our understanding of desistance from crime, challenges in conceptualising the notion of a “gang” and theory, and research around the dynamic nature of a human identity. In Chapter Three, I discuss the notion of parenthood and how it differs for mothers and fathers. These two chapters afford the underlying basis for the research that I had decided to undertake.

In a fourth Chapter, I describe the methodology applied in the study. It includes details on how the research sample had been defined and accessed, how I had decided on using narrative interviews as a tool of data collection and how I approached data analysis. I also describe what key take-away messages I took from running my research.

Chapters Five, Six and Seven depict the study findings and afford analytical inferences. Chapter Five addresses the effect of becoming a father on gang membership experiences of eight inner-London young males and Chapter Six provides an analogical analysis for seven mothers. Behavioural changes interweave reworking of the sense of personal identity as an adaptive response to parenthood demands but they do not by themselves necessarily result straight into self-transformation. They are potentially fragile and
dependent on the availability of viable opportunities, environmental changes and support from pro-social others. Inter-individual differences are observed with regard to when parents decide to embrace the new life role, how able they are to make meaning of their past and how much ownership they take of the future. Some parents frame parenthood as “causing” their self-transformation, but that does not mean that the direct, causal relationship actually does occur. In all cases, it might simply have been maturation that facilitated disengagement; narratives also include references to finding God, disillusionment with fraternal life and partner’s incarceration. In any case, the experience of being a gang member gradually becomes an aversive one for most parents and they gradually reappraise the meaning of conventional life.

**Chapter Seven**, drawing on two previous chapters, compares and contrasts fathers’ and mothers’ experiences in the context of the following themes: timing of change, concept of parenthood, routine activities, behavioural changes, identity change and agency, and generativity.

**Chapter Eight** is a concluding chapter; reiterates what the study objectives were and what we learn about behavioural and identity changes occurring in young adult gang members following the experience of becoming parents. It also discusses how these findings may be practically applied in policy-making and provides recommendations on how we can enhance the quality of support initiatives available to teenage parents involved in or at risk of joining gangs.
Chapter Two: Literature Review – Part 1

I conducted my Literature Review systematically. After having determined my research question, I started to list the keywords from which I would build search phrases to interrogate search engines (e.g. Wiley Online Library, ScienceDirect, NCBI) and the University Library catalogue. I did not impose any language, country or date constraints whilst conducting this search. To ensure that the resulting papers or book chapters were representative and relevant to my research question, I repeated the filtering process. I checked the identified sources against my criteria by using the keywords to search the fulltext and thus refined my selection. I also sourced additional papers from reference lists and run an analogous filtering process. The end result was an extensive list of theoretical articles and empirical studies from which I conceptually synthesised relevant theoretical approaches and research evidence. That helped me identify research gaps and inform my research plan with regard to how they can be filled by generating new evidence.

2.1 Introduction

The Chapters Two and Three both provide the foundations for the understanding of the empirical work carried within this study. This chapter illustrates the theoretical background behind that part of the research question treating about the disengagement from a gang-member identity. First, I will shed more light on relevant definitional issues, that is, how the concept of desistance has been changing over time and what the most all-encompassing yet clear definition of a “gang” should entail. Then, I will explore theoretical approaches that have been most prominent in explaining the process of desistance from crime. These will include: Sampson and Laub’s life-course theory of desistance (focusing on the impact of major life events i.e. “turning points” on one’s criminal career), Giordano et al.’s theory of cognitive transformation (self-transformation occurs following an interaction between a change in social circumstances and the individual’s psychosocial traits) and identity theories developed by Paternoster and Bushway, and Maruna (offering more psychological insight and concentrating on how individuals make sense of the past and how the life lessons provide the scaffold for a constructive future).

2 The used keywords included, for instance, “fatherhood”, “motherhood”, “desistance”, “gang”; I generated multiple keyword combinations to develop search phrases (e.g. fatherhood*desistance*gang).
From there, I move on to outline the importance of agency and generativity, that is, how taking ownership of one’s future and involvement in constructive endeavours to the benefit of others help maintain desistance efforts. The next three sections will in turn focus on what we know about disengagement from gangs in the context of a bigger picture i.e. desistance from crime, what the key challenges are that lead to ambiguities in available empirical data and, based on research, what we know about factors influencing the duration of gang membership and gang exit. Some key messages that I will convey in these three sections include: disengagement from a gang (from the identity of a gang-member) may co-occur but is still conceptually different from desistance from crime (behavioural correlate); most gang-members will leave a gang at some point and to increase their chances of claiming positive roles in the community, we should understand the importance of certification and, especially in the context of this study, the research in general should focus more on females in gangs (as full-fledged members and not gang associates). I will finish this part of the Literature Review with the section devoted to gang exit programmes – outlining what are, in the light of the initiatives that are currently available for young people involved/ at risk of joining gangs, the key constituents of effective support provision.

2.2  Definitional issues

2.2.1  Desistance

The study of desistance is characterised by a substantial difficulty, that is, the lack of one, widely acclaimed operational definition of "desistance". Due to the lack of agreement in this matter, Uggen and Massoglia (2003) affirmed that "because conceptual and operational definitions of desistance vary across existing studies, it is difficult to draw empirical generalisations from the growing literature on desistance from crime" (p.316-317). To pinpoint a couple of examples: Meisenhelder (1977 cited in Kazemian, 2007, p.319) understood desistance as “exiting” i.e. a "successful disengagement from a previously developed, and subjectively recognized, pattern of criminal behaviour.” According to Uggen and Kruttschnitt (1998), desistance implies a transition from offending to non-offending and maintenance of this state. As Maruna observed, "Desistance from crime is an unusual dependent variable for criminologists because it is not an event that happens, but rather it is the sustained absence of a certain type of event (in this case, crime)” (2001, p.17). Likewise, according to Stouthamer-Loeber et al. (2004), desistance is not an isolated event, some sudden conversion occurring in a vacuum. It
would be both an understatement and oversimplification if we were to conceptualise an image of a desister as an individual who has put his/her criminal career to an end but does not change when it comes to every other issue related to self-image, future aspirations or motivations. Bearing that in mind, desistance should be rather envisaged as a process which through its components such as gaining employment (Benda, 2005), establishing pro-social bonds (Maume, Ousey, and Beaver, 2005) and so on gradually improves the adjustment of an ex-offender back to mainstream society. Desistance should be looked at as originating from the complex interaction of diverse changes in psychological and situational factors (Douglas and Skeem, 2005).

### 2.2.2 Gang

Another concept central for this study – a “gang” – is widely used but it does not at all mean that there is a uniform approach to its definition. As a matter of truth, we are still quite far away from reaching a consensus. Yet a quick glimpse at street gang literature is enough to find out that for almost a century there has been lack of agreement on what the *sine qua non* requirements are for the group to be considered as a “gang”, who can be seen as a gang member and what gangs do (Ball and Curry, 1995; Decker and Kempf-Leonard, 1991; Esbensen et al., 2001). Some researchers (e.g., Bullock and Tilley, 2002) even altogether disapprove of using the concept for the reason that it carries a lot of risk of “sticky labels”. These could in turn lead to creating some sort of “gangster identity”. Nonetheless, bearing in mind the vast amount of research on gangs (especially on the US arena), the term, when used, needs to be clearly explained to avoid misinterpretations.

Klein (as cited in Wood and Alleyne, 2010) points out that, in the 1960s’, US gangs were looked at from a generic perspective, that is, they were all put into one bag with an attached label saying: “they all look alike, their members act alike”. As Klein highlighted (p.101): “There was little pressure to attend carefully to issues of definition... what is a gang, when is a group not a gang, what constitutes gang membership or different levels of gang membership?” Also, it has been clear that different sides in the “gang debate” (e.g. criminologists, policy makers, media, politicians) have been using different definitions (Esbensen et al., 2001; Esbensen and Weeraman, 2005), which naturally ends up with media conveying a lot of misconceptions and has resulted in officials’ views of gangs being often very distorted. As long as there is no clear, economic and efficient definition of a gang out there, it will therefore prove very difficult to differentiate with certainty between what is a
fact and what is a fiction (Bursik and Grasmick, 1995).

In their endeavours to provide the operational and theoretical definition, gang researchers usually tend to point out two standards that are applied in assessment of whether a particular social network is a gang. The first is youth status, which is understood to be an age taxonomy stretching in principle from ten years old to the early twenties. The second standard applied is the involvement of group members in, at least, “imprudent” behaviour. Among the attempts at reaching a model definition is, on the UK arena, the one of Sharp, Aldridge and Medina (2006, p.2) who define a gang as: “a group of three or more that spends a lot of time in public spaces, has existed for a minimum of three months, has engaged in delinquent activities in the past 12 months, and has at least one structural feature, i.e., a name, leader, or code/rules.” Others (e.g., Hakkert et al., 2001) have proposed that a youth group becomes a gang if its members see it as a unique entity, if others also perceive them as such and if that group sees antisocial or illegal behaviour as a natural implication of belonging to that group. In contrast, some (e.g., Bennett and Holloway, 2004) do not consider engagement in illegal behaviour to be a compulsory requirement for classifying a group as a gang. If involvement in illegal behaviour was however not a necessary factor for a group to be called a gang, then we would unavoidably have “good” gangs refraining from offending and “bad” gangs engaged in criminal behaviour. This could only further complicate the already complex portrayal of gangs in the literature (Wood and Alleyne, 2010). Gangs offer an environment, which not only facilitates but also reinforces offending behaviour. We can therefore anticipate, as a result of social selection, a higher rate of offending once in a gang as compared to before and a substantial rise in offending following the entry into the gang due to the facilitation effect (Thornberry et al., 2003).

Another issue is that the term “gang” may not necessarily have an adequate (or may not even have one) translation in other languages despite the fact that groups that have features in common with American gangs may be present in that culture. To address that, the Eurogang definition was generated. It refers to the factors that are necessary gang definers (the characteristics that need to be present to call a group a gang). An efficient definition should not be confounded by the features which are pure and simple descriptors including e.g. ethnicity or gender (Klein, 2006). The Eurogang definition considers a gang to be a “durable, street-based group of three or more mostly young people, where the key involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity” (e.g., Esbensen et al., 2001).
The Eurogang definition has been given a lot of acclaim in academia, if not entirely for its conceptual suitability, at least for the effort it embodies to offer researchers a uniform foundation from which further measurements and identifications of gang characteristics can follow (Wood and Alleyne, 2010). Consequently, its application in this study will allow for further comparative, cross-national perspectives (Weerman et al., 2009).

Having shed more light on the concepts of “desistance” and “gangs”, this will now be followed by the discussion of theoretical approaches that have been dominant in developing our understanding of the process of change.

2.3 Theoretical framework behind aspects of change

The matter of desistance from crime has been under researchers’ scrutiny for some time now yet remained surprisingly underexplored when it comes to its application to gangs. Criminal careers appear to be mainly a young person's domain (LeBel et al., 2008). Even persistent offenders, usually at some point between the age of 18 and 35, appear to reach the phase of "spontaneous remission" when there are no offences to be noted (Siegel and Welsh, 2012). According to Hirschi and Gottfredson (1983, p.552), age is related to crime in a way that "easily qualifies as the most difficult fact in the field" and Moffitt (1993) describing this relationship affirms that it is "the most robust and least understood empirical observation in the field of criminology" (p.675). Matza’s 1964 article argued that the “drift” was innate to the juvenile male identity anxiety (Boduszek et al., 2014, p.192) i.e. delinquent teenagers drift between criminal and conventional behaviours and desistance occurs as they get out of material deprivation of adolescence and find a place for themselves in society. Yet others (e.g., Gove, 1985) referred to bio-psychosocial indicators including the co-occurring physical development and transformations in emotional well being that eventually lead to the decrease in deviant motivations. There is still however not enough theoretical apprehension of how a criminal career is terminated, that is, understanding of the mechanisms on which desistance is founded. The most influential theoretical approaches in desistance research have been those by Sampson and Laub, Giordano et al., Maruna, and Paternoster and Bushway, which will now be presented in turn.

2.3.1 Life-course theory of desistance

Undoubtedly, the prime role in desistance analysis was played for a long time by life-
course theories of offending and by Laub and Sampson’s (1993) age-graded theory of informal social control in particular. The theory maintains that turning points such as getting married or getting a stable job contribute to the formation of new social bonds, which are essential if an offender aims to leave the criminal past behind. Desisters every so often reveal their new identities via social roles. It is well documented that those who keep solid and deep social bonds have a greater chance of successful desistance. Nonetheless, it is not yet obvious if positive social bonds stimulate agency or, inversely, those who are highly agentic are more apt to consciously enter positive relationships (Healy, 2013; Kazemian, 2007). Building solid new relationships is not an easy task and for that reason a substantial number of desisters get involved in so called “phantom normalcy” prior to their new identity becoming entirely shaped (Farrall and Calverley, 2006, p.90). Dedication of emotional resources to these indistinct social roles could give them strength and significance, especially when the change process is in its initial stages (Giordano et al., 2007). Successful development and maintenance of social capital substantially enhances the likelihood of gradual elimination of the gap between the past identity of an offender and his/ her current desister identity.

It must be noted however that each individual is strikingly different from another when it comes to the response to social stimuli and the very same event may trigger completely different reactions depending on a array of factors such as age, gender, race or personality traits (Rutter, 1996). To give an example: in the study by Graham and Bowling (1995), it was demonstrated that events such as leaving home and setting up one's own family were very good correlates of desistance for women but only a very small correlation was noted for men. Another issue that cannot be ignored is the likelihood that desistance does not depend solely on these social bonds per se but rather on their perceived quality and strength. For instance, the positive impact of good quality marriage on desistance has been quite consistently demonstrated (Blokland and Nieuwbeerta, 2005; Maume et al., 2005) and so was an effect of stable and rewarding employment (Uggen, 2000). However, the theory of informal social control cannot account for the complete understanding of desistance. When applying this theory, we see human behaviour influenced to a substantial extent by external circumstances, but the important potential of an individual as an "executor of his own will" is not emphasised. Longitudinal data would help establish whether the decision to “go straight” preceded the “desistance-promoting activity” or came afterwards. Likely, individuals make a deliberate decision to find a job or to get married, and if the bonds thus created foster desistance, the processes implicated in maintaining the
job and remaining married must be further explored if we intend to increase our understanding of how offenders cease to commit crime (Maruna, 1999).

2.3.2 Theory of cognitive transformation

The majority of discussions still entirely concentrate not on the *conjoint* effect of subjective and social changes on desistance, but on their separate and individual effects (Le Bel et al., 2008). One has to remember that neither age nor having a job/ being married are isolated events – a complex interaction occurs between them and the psychosocial traits of an offender. Every effort should be made to better grasp both cognitive and social (which are more easy to measure) correlates of desistance in order to allow for the better understanding of the process (Maruna, 1999). Such an attempt was indeed made by Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph (2002). They proposed a theory of desistance, which substantially relies on “cognitive transformations”, which individuals have to go through before the criminal career is deemed concluded. It is as such less formalistic than the theory of informal social control as Giordano et al.’s focal argument is that formative changes in offenders’ lives including getting married or securing a job are not enough to account for desistance. According to them, what needs to happen first is a “cognitive shift/ transformation” in offenders’ minds that occurs once they have commenced to make first steps in the direction of a distinct, more conservative lifestyle. The importance of cognitive transformation is highlighted because behavioural change can then take place even when external triggers of change are absent but the presence of very same triggers is unlikely to be sufficient in leading to change without a primary cognitive change.

Practically, according to Giordano et al., we may discern four kinds of cognitive correlates occurring in the desistance process. The first, and possibly the most essential, is a recognition by an offender of his/ her willingness to change. It is beyond doubt that rational and intentional decisions as well as personal emotions play a crucial role when an individual is attempting to "go straight" (Farrall and Bowling, 1999). How crucial this openness for change is has been analysed on numerous occasions in the variety of treatment literatures with the particular emphasis on those pertaining to addictions (e.g., Boyle, Polinsky, and Hser, 2000). For the purpose of my MPhil dissertation (Lemanska, 2011), I spoke to an ex-offender who had been supported in his desistance efforts by a faith-related organisation. He also recognised the importance of personal initiative: if somebody does not want to change, this change will never occur no matter how conducive
external circumstances are. Along these lines, there is a greater probability of desistance if the change process is structured i.e. an individual has planned a concrete and reasonable strategy for what he/she wants to achieve rather than when a change is of merely a self-improvement type (e.g. “I want to be a better person”).

Another type of cognitive transformation is more explicitly connected to an agent experiencing a particular “hook for change” or an array thereof. This kind of cognitive shift draws our attention to the reciprocity of the relationship between an agent and the external environment. Being willing to change oneself is crucial but it does not seem plausible that it could make up for all the driving force of the change process. An ultimate idea is that there are two key components of successful transformation: an experience of a hook and its appraisal. The desister must not only see the turning point in a positive light but must also identify the resulting outcomes as essentially unable to co-exist with perpetual offending. Giordano et al. (2002) do not therefore take the effect of turning points for granted as control theorists have used to do. It is rather the case that this effect is more complex and variable. Along these lines, making claims that pro-social behaviour spontaneously results from building strong bonds with others seems like an oversimplification.

The third mechanism of cognitive transformation takes place when an individual is capable of creating in his/her mind and then starts to develop a conservative “replacement self” which can replace the “old self” that must be cast away. In contrast to an average individual, who has managed to create for him/herself a fairly positive and productive life course, a persistent offender cannot really utilise his/her past experiences and old routines while he/she strives to move forward. Hooks for change may act as signposts to guide an individual in a positive direction and then, during the process, may offer a solid support. Most of the time, that stimulus that has triggered a change should be present because of its importance to the maintenance of the replacement self (for instance, one’s identity of a parent requires the presence of a child).

The final type of cognitive shift (the “capstone”) encapsulates a change in a way that an agent perceives the deviant conduct per se. The process of desistance may be regarded as virtually complete when an agent does not any more consider the same conduct as rewarding/relevant to self. Overall, Giordano et al.’s theory (2002) is not ultimately incompatible with the approach of Laub and Sampson (1993) as both highlight the
importance of extraneous circumstances as carriers of the changing potential. However, Giordano et al.’s account places greater emphasis on the cognitive task, which needs to be done before these extraneous circumstances can induce their effect. It must be highlighted though that Sampson and Laub later addressed (2003, 2005) Giordano et al.’s (2002) critique of their theory with regard to failing to adequately illustrate the significance of human agency. In the refined version of their theory (2005), they more explicitly communicated the significance of subjective factors associated with turning points. In particular, they emphasised resilience of identity, personal judgement and decision-making, which may all follow from transformations in social structures. They clearly stated that any transition event is not experienced in the vacuum but that this experience is “mediated by perceptions and human decision making” (Sampson and Laub, 2005, p.37).

2.3.3 Narrative and Identity change theories

Self-narratives have found an important place in desistance research since at least 2001 when Maruna published Making Good. For those individuals who have embarked on a journey of desistance, storytelling is important not only because it helps them better understand their past but also because of its “significant effects in the present and towards the future by eliciting appropriate emotional responses that condition the agent’s current dispositions” (Vaughan, 2007, p.399). The reworked identity only affords space to these values and beliefs that are incompatible with offending (Burnett and Maruna, 2004; Maruna, 2001; Vaughan, 2011). It is assumed that narratives afford personal valuation to significant life events and turning points. Also, they seem to serve individuals as a tool to rationalise one’s own past actions and make sense of one’s own motivations. Consequently, the desister’s self-narrative stores personal truth rather than objective, historical truth, which is usually fairly different (Maruna, 2001). The act of reworking personal past, which is often shameful and regrettable, makes it possible to give it a new meaning. It is this narrative’s subjective rather than objective truth, which gives the desister the scaffold for the future actions (Maruna, 2001).

Maruna (2001) explored the phenomenological angle of desistance and interviewed fifty-five males and ten females. Thirty participants were categorised as “desisters” (desistance was operationalised as crime-free behaviour lasting longer than one year) and twenty participants were categorised as “persisters”. The study entailed a systematic “compare and contrast” analysis of desisters’ narratives with narratives of a matched sample of persisters.
It was demonstrated that desisting offenders reinterpreted their past via “wilful, cognitive distortions” so as to be able to “make good” (Maruna, 2001, p.9). Maruna made a case that to become a successful desister, an individual needed to make the past life fall into place, needed to give it a sense and subsequently to build up “redemption scripts”, i.e. where an offender reinterprets his/ her past and such transformed identity is compatible with the current way of living. Redemption scripts got their name because they were filled with a sense of purpose and a pursuit of self-worth and life meaning. The desisters who took part in Maruna’s study wished to pay back for the harm they had caused in their “past life” and went on to accomplish this by taking on generative work in e.g. counselling or youth work. They did show that they had become effective agents and were likely to look for possibilities of self-development believing that what they had gone through prepared them to now serve as positive examples. What “redemption scripts” also tend to embody is the individual’s belief that he/ she is inherently a good person and all the wrongdoings in the past had stemmed from him being socially excluded and disadvantaged. Consequently, a desister looks at his/ her embeddedness in a cycle of crime as resulting from being a victim of both society and circumstances. Now, once they have established themselves as desisters, they have the first real opportunity to act in a way showing off their good qualities and they can start to live such a life that until then had been unavailable for them. In contrast, persisters keep living by a “condemnation script” and they do not hold the belief that they can effectively change. They seem to believe that their fate is already sealed be it by chance or past experiences and, consequently, they do not pursue a search for life meaning and do not have much hope when it comes to finding and acting upon opportunities in life. They tend to passively receive what life throws at them and take for granted their failure in the life away from crime.

In brief, it may be assumed that long-term desistance to be effective needs to involve specific and considerable changes in the individual’s self. Above all, an individual needs to hold himself/ herself accountable for the committed acts. However, this is about something more than just making attributions. Bovens (1998) distinguished two types of responsibility: passive and active. The former represents the literal understanding of “responsibility” that is an individual acknowledges to have done certain things in the past whereas the latter signifies that he/ she is effectively responsible for mending things for the future (Braithwaite and Roche, 2001). Active responsibility is therefore portrayed as directed at the future, does not ruminate over the past but concentrates on what should be done to make good or to make reparations for what had been done (Maruna and LeBel,
Narratives of successful desisters contain far more of these active responsibility themes than internal and deliberate attributions for one’s wrongdoings (Maruna, 2001).

Last but not least, Maruna, Wilson and Curran (2006) explored the issue of religious conversion among incarcerated offenders and discovered that the conversion experience had a substantial effect on prisoners’ self-narrative. Similarly therefore, the said self-narrative put an offender’s life into a wider context, helped work out the sense in past actions and offered a glimmer of hope for the future, which was also true for long-term prisoners. On the other hand, Vaughan (2011, p.11) claims that offenders only demonstrate very minimal narratives which are “sparse and populated by the agent’s own concerns whilst the perspective of others rarely intrudes”. He nonetheless agrees with Maruna that to be a successful desister, an individual must rework his/ her past identity so there is a connection between past and present. He/ she also needs to accommodate the perspective of other people and to situate him/ herself as an agent in his/ her story. An individual should also be able to self-reflect, that is, to think critically and morally evaluate past actions; and as his/ her narrative accommodates that perspective of others, one should acknowledge that offending had caused harm to others. This way, one gets the ownership of the past and, at the same time, a sense of detachment dedicating oneself to new values and beliefs in the coming future. By developing this constructive self-understanding, a new script solidifies within which there is no place for offending.

Notably, as personal narratives are seen as adaptable enough to have capacity for new information, there is always a chance that persisters may alter the values and beliefs they hold about themselves and the world (Vaughan, 2007). When viewed from this perspective, the identity theory of desistance depicts an important progress on the static and fairly idiosyncratic picture as offered by cognitive researchers.

As much impact on research on desistance as Maruna and specifically his 2001 study had had, the findings have not been consistently supported in the research that followed. For instance, Presser (2008) found that redemptive themes in desisters’ narratives that would refer to specific and rational strategy of self-transformation were rarely manifested in the narratives of men who had a history of violent crimes. Most of them actually displayed life scripts characterised with negligible appraisal of past behaviours and only low-level dedication to successful desistance. Any ideas for self-change, if put across at all, were not rich in detail. Likewise, Healy and O’Donnell (2008) discovered that desisters’-to-be narratives lacked the themes of agency and generativity. Rather, those desisters were
concerned about becoming like everyone else and their ambitions were more mundane, to find an employment, to be a good parent and so on. It is likely that once they have managed to attain these more basic goals, they may shift their focus to the next, higher level.

Another contribution in the quest for a comprehensive theory of the identity change in desistance comes from Paternoster and Bushway (2009). Their theory is more cognitive and individualistic than the one by Giordano et al. (2002) and comes across as more congruent with Maruna’s approach maintaining that desistance entails a purposeful act of self-transformation: “sustained desistance most likely requires a fundamental and intentional shift in a person’s sense of self” (Maruna, 2001, p.17). However, there is one important difference being that Paternoster and Bushway believe that the old identity needs to be completely cast off for the sake of the new identity whereas, on the contrary, Maruna states (p.154) that “Desisting is framed as just another adventure consistent with their life-long personality, not as a change of heart. Again, this allows the individual to frame his/her desistance as a case of personality continuity rather than change.”

Paternoster and Bushway (2009) also introduce the construct of a “feared self”, which is what an offender is likely to become if he/she sticks to the criminal path and of a “possible self”, which is the opposite: what an offender is likely to become if he/she uptakes a new and positive identity that he/she is motivated towards. The former is seen as the source of motivation to start the move away from offending. This theory is an effort to illustrate the combined effect of a subjective transformation (the change in one’s predisposition to continue offending, which is also related to the shift in one’s preferences, for example, conscious decision of moving away from a gang) and changes occurring in social networks. They then emphasise the role of human agency understood as a driving force behind the change and allowing an individual to successfully sustain desistance. An individual through his/her change process establishes a new identity into which fall all subsequent changes in the immediate environment (e.g. finding employment, becoming a parent etc.) that authors call “structural breaks.” They further imply that the identity change is a sine qua non of becoming a desister, as without that stage being completed, one is unlikely to achieve the structural support. While they maintain, similarly to Giordano et al. (2002), that regular social bonds are essential in the desistance process, they claim that these cannot be accessed until after an individual has first made a deliberate decision to change and then has actually started to change his/her identity. Frankly speaking, it is nonetheless challenging to offer empirical backup for this theory as it is
difficult to estimate the identity change in an individual and then to relate that change retrospectively to events, which triggered it or, prospectively, to transformations in social networks and variations in behavioural preferences.

In brief, while the above-presented theories have generally been described as opposing, it is sensible to look at each of them as contributing valuable knowledge on the factors playing a role in the process leading to desistance. As some factors may induce a greater effect on individuals’ behaviour than others, it therefore certainly appears that each theoretical framework provides, on its own, only a partial explanation. Alas, integrated theories of desistance are still missing from criminological literature (Farrall et al., 2011). That is why it is so important to pursue the work in search of an overarching theory by establishing the associations between different approaches.

In this study, my fieldwork and analysis took most from Maruna’s approach. There are three main reasons for which I decided to do so. First, other theories to which I have earlier referred are either more or less sociogenic, that is, they lack appreciation of an individual both as a whole as well as of his/her subjective roles and endeavours. In that respect, Maruna’s narrative approach offers a more rounded and efficient context for understanding desistance and its inner subtleties. Second, I appreciate the fact that Maruna’s approach not only attempts to account for how an individual desists but also argues what can be done to increase the chance that the change would be maintained. Employment and engagement in generative pursuits are hereby instrumental. If ex-offenders manage to claim for themselves new roles in the society that are pro-social and constructive, they would have higher expectations of themselves to steer clear of criminal opportunities. Interviewees in this study were either parents already or “tomorrow’s new parents” and in the light of Maruna’s theory, we should value them for who they had become and for who they would become rather than constantly criminalising them for past deeds. Third and relatedly, the findings from Maruna’s Liverpool study have had important implications for, for example, probation practice. They have suggested that it is vital for the probation clients to learn how to make the meaning of their past lives but, at the same time, as much emphasis should be put on them mastering the skill of planning for and taking hold of one’s future. They should also be given opportunities to get involved in productive endeavours.
What can also be inferred from the discourse above is that the narrative approach is ingrained in archetypes of human beings as active agents in their own story. The language used by desisters illustrates that, by taking steps to act differently, they feel a sense of agency; they are not passive recipients of things just happening to them. As agency and generativity seem to lie at the core of a “desister identity”, the next section will review how they have been applied in the very context of both desistance from crime and disengagement from gangs.

2.4 Agency and Generativity

What does “agency” mean? What at first seems like quite a straightforward, even rhetorical question does not prove to be that easy to answer. Every respected researcher (e.g., Bottoms et al., 2004; Vaughan, 2007; Weaver, 2009) highlights that this is something that should be studied more and in greater depth when it comes to either desistance from crime or disengagement from gangs. Yet, if we have a look at the research to date, we will notice that so far no consensus has been reached when it comes to the operational definition of a concept. Several interrelated constructs have been offered to account for “agency” including hope and self-efficacy. This is however not enough as self-efficacy is only a sub-mechanism of agency (Bandura, 1989) while agency is a sub-mechanism of the more extensive concept of hope (Snyder, 2000).

On the one hand, the wish and the capacity to change, and active acting upon them in order to transform the current state into something positive and productive seem to be the very essence of agency (O’Connell et al., 2007). However, agency is also said to be rooted in an individual’s commitment to acquire the capital required for change regardless of its current availability (Moulden and Marshall, 2005). Situational action theory (Wikström and Treiber, 2009) brings together motivation and opportunity suggesting that agency comes about when an individual chooses a specific behavioural pathway over several other potential options. This decision is grounded in personal certainty of which course of action will lead to a desired result. Agency is therefore specifically related to contextual circumstances (or, more precisely, to the interchange between personal and contextual circumstances) as the environment either encourages or limits personal choices of behaviour options. The likelihood of and the extent to which an ex-gang member achieves the plans and realises the hopes depends on how easily available a legitimate identity is. We anticipate that in a society that tends to stigmatise and marginalise those with a
criminal and/or gang past, and thus prevents them from full re-adaptation to mainstream society, opportunities and an individual’s ability to leave a gang will be limited (Decker and Lauritsen, 2002; Hastings, Dunbar, and Bania, 2011). Long-term gang membership may have substantially hindered the individual’s capability to get employability skills thus minimising his/her chance of getting legal employment after having left the gang. Little opportunity may consecutively lead a gang member to keep thinking that it is more beneficial for him/her to stay in a gang rather than to leave.

Cassell and Weinrath (2011), in their small-scale study, interviewed eight male gang members in Winnipeg, Canada. They were aged 18 to 27 and actively participating in the Gang Response and Suppression Plan. Four participants mentioned the role of family and/or close friends in their attempts to leave the gang. However, the other four participants stated that the family/friends’ effect was not a reason and they identified the issue of agency when elaborating on their decision to exit the gang. And this was mentioned spontaneously – participants were not directly asked about their autonomy of decision-making. As the two of them pinpointed (p.83):

It was my own decision in my own head (...). Nobody can convince you, nobody who wants you to do it except yourself.

I had to make my own decision to leave, whatever I gotta do I gotta do myself. I not trying to tell nobody, ‘Hey, I’m gonna leave this, I’m gonna leave that.’ Because I make my own decision in the first place and I do my own decision by getting anywhere my own way.

The fact that in Cassell and Weinrath’s study participants came up with the agency issue without preceding prompts implies that innate motivation played for them an essential role in the transition out of gangs.

Likewise, in the wider context of desistance from crime, Giordano et al. (2002), Rumgay (2004), and Sommers, Baskin and Fagin (1994) all demonstrated that desisters expressed personal motivation for self-transformation and had a firm belief in their ability to change; devotion to terminate the criminal career was a necessary prerequisite of their potential desistance. Also, Sampson and Laub affirmed in their revised theory (2003, p.280-281) that "personal agency looms large" in trajectories of both persisters and desisters, and that "the men studied were active participants in constructing their lives". On its own, however, motivation cannot ensure successful desistance. One’s sense of self-efficacy shapes the challenges an individual is ready to handle and how much that individual is going to keep...
up his/ her efforts after an unsuccessful try (Bandura, 1989). Motivation and self-confidence in relation to one’s potential of change have a joint positive influence on desistance, as Burnett and Maruna (2004) demonstrated in a sample of prisoners. They concluded that self-efficacy could induce a durable impact on behaviour. Even though the majority of prisoners expected that it would be challenging to find decent employment, desisters more often explained that they were pro-active in seeking employment. This points towards persistent attempts that successful desisters make to look for opportunities for self-improvement regardless of outcomes achieved or challenges encountered.

In truth, it is possible for successful desisters to misjudge the extent to which they think they are in control of their lives. These, as Maruna (2001, p.106) calls them, “positive illusions” are likely to nurture and support one’s incentive to change. Most desisters communicate time and again their conventional goals which suggests that incongruities do not result from vague future plans but from a disparity between methods and aspirations. This finds reflection in the words of Shapland and Bottoms (2011, p.271) who stated that: “wishing to desist is one thing, actually getting there […] is another.” I need to reiterate here that the identity change is key to both desistance from crime and disengagement from gangs. In this study, I focus on desistance (disengagement) from the identity of a gang member and not on it’s behavioural correlate i.e. offending. Williams and Gantt (2013, p.186) speak about “temporal continuity”, which supposedly gives an individual the confidence that present battles will eventually generate anticipated future outcomes. This happens to be vital for agentic behaviour, providing the individual with an aim and bearings. Regardless of the current situation, an individual who has a vision for his/ her future successful and positive self - be it a great parent or an efficient employee – will surely have high motivation to carry on with the hard work of self-change. On the other hand, when the chances of building that positive identity seem to be slim or even non-existent, it is likely for many would-be desisters to go back to their old ways, at least for the time being (King, 2013). According to Vaughan (2007, p.390), when a desister faces testing circumstances, he/ she finds him/ herself in an “internal conversation” and weighs likely future opportunities against concerns of here and now (discernment). He/ she then appraises the alternatives and reflects on possible reactions of others (deliberation) before reorganising the priorities to allow new responsibilities to crystallise (dedication). One must show “conscious commitment” to steer clear of old routines and to sustain new ones following an “affirmative choice” to reorganise one’s life (Mulvey et al., 2004, p.223).
What Paternoster and Pogarsky added to that complex picture in 2009 was the concept of “thoughtfully reflective decision-making” (TRDM). Based on that model, for the decision-making process to be efficient, an individual first must gather all the necessary information related to the problem, then discover and evaluate potential solutions to the problem and finally, proceed into the last, self-reflective phase and look back at the decision with a critical perspective. Paternoster and Pogarsky affirmed in the same research that young people who were not effective decision-makers were prone to become low achievers as adults, to lack strong bonds with pro-social others and to hardly benefit greater society or even have detrimental effect because of being at high risk of turning into career criminals. What the discussed research by Vaughan (2007) and Paternoster and Pogarsky (2009) seems to imply is that for an individual to gain control of the future, he/she needs to be capable of considering and effectively evaluating different alternatives and making the most positive life path choice. Even though ex-gang members tend to highlight that they made a conscious and rational decision to exit a gang, it is obvious that if we completely directed our attention towards cognitions, we would achieve as an end product an excessively limited portrayal of agency. For instance, it is perfectly plausible that an individual might behave, in his/her view, sensibly, decisively and purposefully (i.e. agentically) but the very same behaviour will come across as reckless and illogical to the outside observer. We should also bear in mind that there are people who practically desist from crime or exit a gang but this is not coupled by cognitive change. On those occasions, an external life event may trigger an apparent change yet we must specify the ways in which these events end up having an effect on behaviour (Vaughan, 2007). Overall, any theory of agency must adequately illustrate the role of cognitions but this should only account for the proportion of a comprehensive conceptual framework.

Having said that, what is equally important for successful reworking of one’s identity and should be therefore incorporated into that framework is emotional attitude towards what the future will bring. Healy (2013) maintains that those who claim a new pro-social identity have a great deal of optimism in their approach whereas non-desisters seem to be the exact opposite, displaying a sense of defeatism about the future. Their narrative accounts are frequently beset with feelings of shame and sour memories of things they could have achieved and chances they have lost. Cognitive theorists like Beck (2005) maintain that persistent, negative viewpoints generate a sense of hopelessness that may be very detrimental to making a positive use of available future opportunities. Not being able to spot and to act upon upcoming chances results in an individual ruminating on his/her
negative past and therefore locks him in an endless cycle of the offender or gang member identity (Le Bel et al., 2008). On the whole, it looks that while building the more positive identity, there is a decrease in negative emotions and increase in positive affect as with the passing time, feelings of guilt and regret give place to feelings of self-efficacy, self-satisfaction and hope (Farrall and Calverley, 2006). Remembering about the alleged intermediate bond between cognitions and actions, it is crucial that the inclusive desistance theory does justice to emotional components of agency.

I have already mentioned earlier that, other than becoming more agentic, an individual that is claiming a pro-social identity for him/her should also be given opportunities to get involved in productive endeavours what is known as “generativity”. The most fundamental form of generativity is the literal concern for the “next generation”, that is, for one’s children. Monte (1995, p.291) defined generativity as “the ability to transcend the immediate self-related interests of the person in favour of a view of generations to come”. Those assuming a non-offender/ non-gang member identity believe that their past experiences have provided them with nothing less than a very special “skills training” and they desire to make use of it by preventing the next generation from going the same path as they had done. This is the essence of Maruna’s “making good”; an individual “rewrites a shameful past into a necessary prelude to a productive and worthy life” (2001, p.87). In his sample of desisters, Maruna found a substantial evidence for generative tendencies reflected in individuals taking up either paid or voluntary work and this striving for productivity is “a product of both inner drives and social demands” (p.118).

Regardless of whether this is raising one’s own children or doing paid/ voluntary work, the point is to bring benefits to other people rather than just to self. Also, whatever the desister involves him/herself in, this must have a deeper meaning so we can expect continued engagement from the desister. The former alcoholic/drug addict who gets to work with people with addictions or an ex-gang member who finds him/herself working as a mentor or an outreach worker are seen as “professional exes” or “wounded healers” (LeBel, Richie, and Maruna, 2015). They believe that the life wisdom they had acquired through their experiences should not stay hidden but shall be passed on to those who are still struggling. Turning negative past into something positive gives an individual a chance to make up for at least some of the wasted time, is fulfilling and, importantly, very often also serves as a cleansing experience.
Barry (2007) distinguished a process called “social recognition” which goes well together with Maruna’s approach. When viewed from her perspective, social recognition takes place when an individual gets hold of social capital and locates an opportunity that best utilises it by doing something for the benefit of others. As it seems that generative interests do not generally emerge until after an individual has done a great deal of effort on reworking his/her sense of identity and has started to build strong bonds with others (McAdams and St. Aubin, 1992), we generally associate generative actions with middle adulthood. We expect long-term desisters and older individuals to show more engagement in these as compared to younger desisters. Interestingly, even persisters are at times seen taking on some generative work, which would suggest that at some point in the developmental process it comes across as “natural” to do something generative (Sampson and Laub, 2003).

In brief, taking on responsibilities and involvement in generative pursuits are instrumental factors in the growth and viability of social recognition. Being responsible for one’s self-development as well as towards others (e.g. responsible parenthood) offers former gang members the chance to accrue as well as devote human and social capital within the society at large. Likewise, generativity provides fulfilment, a sense of restitution and legitimacy; the latter is particularly important in ultimately ensuring social recognition.

After having explored the key theoretical approaches in desistance research and having conceptualised agency and generativity as transformative aspects of desistance, the next section will focus on emphasising that to date the desistance literature has yet not been fully integrated into gang research.

2.5 The integration of the desistance literature into gang research

Klein and Maxson highlighted in 2006 (p.154): “surprisingly little research has been conducted on gang desistance and the process of leaving gangs”. Now, in 2014, progress has been made in researching gangs academically but, still, it must be admitted that in the light of the gang literature, the phenomenon of desistance remains undiscovered to a substantial extent.

The key principle in Sampson and Laub’s (2003, 2005), and Laub and Sampson’s (1993) afore-discussed life-course theory of offending is that: “crime is more likely to occur when
an individual’s bond to society is attenuated” (2005, p.22) – the principle which is in compliance with longer-established theories of social control (e.g., Hirschi, 1969). It was already observed by Thrasher almost a century ago (1927) (cited in Melde and Esbensen, 2011, p.516) that: “gang boy’s conception of his role is more vivid with reference to his gang than to other social groups. Since he lives largely in the present, he conceives of the part he is playing in life as being in the gang; his status in other groups is unimportant to him, for the gang is his social world.” It can be inferred from research to date that embeddedness in and devotion to the gang is bolstered by means of explicit and implicit demands of being dedicated and faithful to the group. Dedication to one’s gang implies that an individual is eager to disregard high stakes (e.g., punishment from the justice system) of their participation in a gang in the interest of the group (Miller and Decker, 2001). As a consequence, the significance of the ties with a gang as a whole and with specific gang peers may result in “knifing off” of pro-social bonds one had held beforehand and extinguishing normative values (Moffitt, 1993). The decline in attachment to pro-social others is central as “the essence of internalization of norms, conscience, or super-ego lies in the attachment of the individual to others,” (Hirschi, 1969, p.18). Therefore, when one decides to exit a gang, we would anticipate the reverse process, that is, the restoration of bonds with pro-social others and investment in rediscovering normative values. More broadly, an additional constituent of turning points entails building up social communication, which affords guidance and supervision by offering “opportunities for investment in new relationships” (Sampson and Laub, 2005, p.34).

It has been discussed earlier that desistance from crime should be looked at as a gradual process rather than a one-off event. With regard to disengagement from gangs, two patterns (gradual and abrupt) have been observed by the researchers. For instance, Decker and Van Winkle (1996) analysed the path, which led each of 24 former St Louis gang members to exit the gang. In the series of semi-structured interviews, it was demonstrated that those gang members left their gang in one of the two ways, the first being an abrupt exit, something parallel to the notion of "knifing-off" (Maruna and Roy, 2007). "Knifing-off", like a catharsis, implies the absolute modification of one's previous social roles and opportunities. For gang members, it refers to the determined cutting of ties with peers from a gang, which hence results into the elimination of or at least into the reduction in criminal opportunities. The second pattern illustrated desistance as a developmental, progressive process, a gradual "drifting away" from a gang (Bushway et al., 2001). It does seem that regardless of which of the two above patterns is in place for a
particular individual (abrupt vs. progressive), leaving a gang is characterised by the
development of values that are in contrast to those held by the gang (Decker and Lauritsen,
2002). This explanation supports an earlier study of gang members in Southern California
by Vigil (1988). He found the desistance process to be characterised by a so called
"succession quality" which comprised an interplay of the array of motives and the sequence
of events, eventually pushing and pulling an individual away from a gang. These events
result into a gang member's decision to exit a gang.

How this departure occurred often depended on an array of factors including how strongly
an individual was motivated to leave the gang and whether he was a peripheral or a core
member. Peripheral and core members occupy age-determined circles differing in the level
of commitment and group dependence (Pyrooz and Decker, 2011). For that matter, core
gang members are likely to find leaving the gang more difficult as they are more involved
in gang activities and more deeply embedded in a group in contrast to peripheral gang
members who have weaker bonds and are more likely to simply drift out (Klein, 1995).

In the context of this study, we can anticipate that the experience of becoming a parent is
likely to have a lagged effect on the disengagement from gangs, for males especially, and
that the disengagement was a gradual process of drifting away rather than an abrupt exit. It
is because at the age of 19 (average age of first-time parenthood for both mothers and
fathers in this study), these individuals are still in a precarious position and too young to
fully benefit from this transformative experience straight away. It is exceptionally rare for
them to have a complete, high quality “respectability package” (Giordano et al., 2002), that
is, a stable relationship, legal employment and a supportive environment. It seems that
until additional desistance-reinforcing elements come into play, young parents are often
not able to use parenthood to their benefit.

2.6 Challenges and problems worth further exploration

2.6.1 Follow-ups beyond adolescence

One of the issues relevant to desistance research is having time and means to run the
follow-up studies to evaluate to what extent a given sample under study manages to
maintain desistance in the long-term (Sampson and Laub, 2003). Making a reliable
judgement with regard to when an individual ceased to offend massively depends on how
long he/ she has been followed-up (Bushway, Thornberry, and Krohn, 2003). If the follow-
up period is short, findings may turn out to be very misleading, which was noted by Farrington and Wikström (1994). To give an example: Le Blanc and Fréchette (1989) did a follow-up of their research sample of male participants until they turned 25 and found that, on average, men were last convicted at the age of 19.9 years. However, when the follow-up was extended to their early 40s', men were on average last convicted at the age of 31, which is a very different result. The main reason for which desistance should be studied beyond adolescence is encapsulated by the fact that the majority of juvenile offenders do not maintain a criminal career as adults (Moffitt, 1993). As a consequence, samples of juvenile offenders may not necessarily be the best option when exploring mechanisms and roots of desistance. Longitudinal studies allow for the control of differences among individuals on the level of stable factors but do not succeed at grasping the differences in more dynamic factors such as personal motivations and goals (Uggen and Piliavin, 1998). This is problematic because research to date implies that these intra-individual changes in dynamic qualities may be a key to why some individuals are able to maintain desistance and some not (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001). Still, these longitudinal, prospective studies find it hard to reject the possibility that changes in external circumstances (getting married, finding employment) occurred because subjective changes in an individual's approach had occurred first (Le Bel et al., 2008).

2.6.2 The issue of intermittency

Another important issue, which was highlighted by Sampson and Laub (2001), and Piquero (2004), is that the difficulty to provide the operational definition of desistance from crime results from intermittency problem. They debate on whether we can even speak of desistance in the cases when an individual committed only one act of crime. The intermittent nature of offending can at times result into the illusion of desistance (Kazemian, 2007). It may be worth to refer to Maruna (2001) for that matter, who has suggested that we may distinguish two separate phases occurring in the desistance process, that is, primary and secondary desistance.

Primary desistance would refer to the notion of desistance at its literal, most fundamental level and would simply mean a crime-free gap during a criminal career. It is reasonable to assume that any criminal career exhibits intermittency to the certain extent across an individual's life course as there are times of higher and lower rates of offending (e.g., Huizinga, Loeber, and Thornberry, 1993). Intermittency patterns noted in offending
careers therefore highlight how important it is to understand desistance as a process and not as a singular, abrupt act. Each and every offender deals with an infinite amount of such breaks during his/her criminal career; in the case of Warr (1998), this is 1 year whereas in the case of Farrington and Hawkins (1991) this is 11 years. Also, Nagin, Farrington and Moffitt’s (1995) analysis of official conviction records of adolescent-limited offenders made researchers assume that the participants in the sample had desisted from criminal careers roughly around the time when they had turned 20 years old. However, when looking into participants’ self-reports, it turned out that they were still committing intermittent and covert offences at the age of 30. It is crucial for further research to counteract this problem of incompatibility between findings from self-report and official records as, first, the substantial majority of findings about pathways into and out of crime published to date have made use of official records and, second, longitudinal self-report studies should better track their participants into adulthood.

Secondary desistance, on the other hand, pertains to a core self-identity change in which an ex-offender regards him or herself as such (Gadd, 2006, Maruna and Farrall, 2004). It is not only about offending which stops but also about exiting existing roles and reorganising one’s life based on new roles being taken; secondary desistance is characterised with specific and measurable transformations at the level of one’s personal “self” (e.g., Giordano et al., 2002, Maruna, 2001). This reorganisation is likely to be explained with a so-called “looking-glass” process of public reaction. The looking glass self is a concept that goes back to C. H. Cooley (1902) (in Maruna, 2012) and conveys that an individual’s self shapes itself based on how others perceive this individual. In essence, if it is the case that almost every offender goes through the phase of a pause in a criminal career (primary desistance), it is likely that those who are seen by the environment as “transformed” are more apt to carry on with secondary desistance than those who the public does not perceive in the same way. It is a tedious work for those who stopped offending, left prison or exited a gang to constantly make the case that they have changed, that they are not the same people any more (Gadd, 2006). They are often seen by the society through the prism: “Once you have stepped into something, you are always in it” so for instance “once a gang member, always a gang member”. It is far easier to be given a negative label than it is to establish one’s status as a changed person, which is known as the negativity bias (Maruna et al., 2004). As Lofland wrote (1969, p.210): “Long years of truly exemplary conformity or even hyperconformity and stellar service to society may be required” until a stigma may be lifted.
To be able to turn one’s life around successfully, one needs a massive amount of self-belief and this becomes really challenging if the change is not being recognised. When viewed from this perspective, it is evident that secondary desistance should be of particular interest to researchers. However, (e.g., Bushway et al., 2001) desistance measures predominantly focus on the state of non-offending rather than on this actual process of desistance. Such a perspective virtually puts the sign of equity between temporary non-offending and desistance, as the majority of research findings do not provide the opportunity to validate whether an individual has stayed offending-free in the long-term (Baskin and Sommers, 1998). Additionally, due to this focus on the final state of non-offending, the character and the trajectory of the process by which individuals reach this stage are being overlooked. Individuals differ in criminal career patterns including its length, age of onset and frequency of committed offences but they tend to be treated as a homogeneous group; as if the path leading to the final state of non-offending was the same for everyone (Bushway et al., 2001). These differences however may carry relevant and specific information about contingencies around desistance such as the length of the process and the relation between the probability of its occurrence and an offender type. The lack of knowledge on when the process starts, how lengthy it is for different offenders makes establishing causal links between explanatory factors and desistance a difficult task (Loeber and Leblanc, 1990).

2.6.3 Gender differences

Additionally, the likely link between gender and desistance also remains hugely unexplored in desistance research. As it is the case with the majority of criminological research, also desistance research has predominantly focused on male behaviour and one cannot simply extrapolate these findings to describe how desistance unfolds for females. It may be noted that the age-crime pattern for females does not really differ in terms of shape (as opposed to the magnitude) from that characteristic of males (Moffitt et al., 2001), as an offender reaches his/ her twenties and thirties, there is a visible decline in prevalence of offending for both sexes. Where may potential differences lie?

First, as maintained by Clampet-Lundquist et al. (2006) and Moffitt et al. (2001), female youth have less exposure to delinquent peers as they do not spend as much of their time in proximity of illegitimate opportunities as do males. This happens mainly due to two reasons. One relates to how stratified in terms of gender the illegitimate marketplace is and the second is the result of how deviant peer relations impact the behaviour of male and
female youth (Steffensmeier and Allen, 1996). With regard to the latter, some researchers (e.g., Krutschnitt, 1996; Piquero et al., 2005) demonstrated that girls’ peer groups are naturally different from boys’ ones as only in the latter case one of the group’s usual characteristics is that the collectivity substantially increases the risk of committing a criminal offence. On the other hand, for instance, Smith and Paternoster (1987) maintained that exposure to deviant peers had the same effect for young males and females, increasing the risk of delinquent behaviour in both groups.

Second, Sampson and Laub (1990) hypothesised that, for instance, being in a positive and loving relationship serves as a turning point and later research (Capaldi, Kim, and Owen, 2008) demonstrated that it has an especially strong effect for men. In particular, Capaldi et al. (2008) discovered that, for men, the strength of the loving relationship effect on desistance was positively connected to relationship solidity and inversely related to the romantic partner’s anti-social behaviour. Nonetheless, bearing in mind a certain probability of females falling victims to domestic abuse (Brown, Miller, and Maguin, 1999), it may be anticipated that the discussed protective effect of a loving relationship does not necessarily need to be just about as substantial for females as it is for males (Leverentz, 2006).

The findings on gender aspect of desistance are therefore ambiguous and quite tricky to unravel. Possibly, different sampling techniques and study designs are to some extent accountable for these disparities among studies. Overall however, the findings reveal that, at best, related processes may be demonstrated in a different way across gender and may induce discrete impacts on desistance of men and women. One should be cautious projecting the findings on male desistance onto female desisters. Actually, Giordano et al. (2002) propose that when considering desistance among females in particular, the role of cognitive transformations, personal agency and motivations for self-change looms larger than the one of social capital and social control. This issue has been raised by Maruna and Farrall (2004) to give a better explanation of desistance in the sample of offenders in the Liverpool Desistance Study. Maruna stated that desisters were significantly less likely than recidivists to find negative events as stemming from individual’s stable personality weaknesses but more likely to consider positive events to be related to stable personality traits. Likewise, with regard to female offenders, Giordano et al. (2002) and Rungay (2004) assumed that desisters demonstrated personal dedication to self-transformation and a high sense of confidence that they had enough capability to get there. It became apparent
in both studies that cognitive motivations for change were likely to be of prime importance in females’ desistance process.
Overall, research to date has not provided enough insight into potential gender differences in the underlying mechanisms of desistance and, from what is available, the results appear to be very mixed (Broidy and Cauffman, 2006).

This section has delineated the conceptual difference between desistance from crime and desistance from gang membership as well as the challenges impeding the research. The next section will depict how factors related to gang membership per se are likely to influence gang exit, that is, the length of gang membership, embeddedness in a gang, risk of victimisation and the prospect of punishment for anti-social behaviour.

2.7 For how long, how deep and why to leave?

Overall, it needs to be acknowledged that the greatest barrier to exiting a gang does not result from a fear that the gang may want to chase and punish a leaver but rather results from a fear that this exit will mean losing some point of reference. Decker and Lauritsen (2002, p.53) suggested that exiting a gang might involve “rejecting one’s friends and peers”. An individual thus leaves behind what he/ she got to know well in order to attempt to live along the conventions that the society imposes on individuals but this very same society is very reluctant to embrace him: “After all, what incentive is there to leave the gang when it is the source of their friends and when past criminal activities committed as gang members cause many groups to treat them as if they remained in the gang?” (Marcovitz, 2010, p. 90) This goes back to the concept of the “looking-glass” self, which means that without some real recognition (i.e. certification) of the reform in their behaviour (gang leaving), many fresh gang leavers may not be capable of keeping up the challenging process of desistance. Hastings et al. (2011) argued that external social hurdles including this ever-sticking “gang” label close many opportunities for a gang member after he/ she has left a gang. Membership in a gang may have successfully reduced the chance of an individual to acquire any skills that are sought for in legal job market in this way decreasing his/ her chance to get an employment after a gang exit. This very limited array of available opportunities may in turn lead to the perception of the benefits of remaining in a gang as outweighing the costs of being a gang member.
2.7.1 The duration of gang membership

Thornberry et al. (1993) and later Battin et al. (1998) demonstrated that when adolescents join gangs, they do it for two years on average or less. For instance, Thornberry’s research team ran the Rochester Youth Development Study between 1988 and 1992. It was based on a sample of seven and eight grades in a public school in Rochester, NY comprising 729 boys and 271 girls. Afro-American pupils made sixty-eight per cent of the sample, 17 per cent were Hispanic and fifteen per cent were White. Interviewing took place once every six months over the course of 4.5 years. Around 30 per cent of interviewed pupils joined a gang at some point during the study period but the majority withdrew from it after a quite short while:

Gang membership turned out to be a rather fleeting experience for most of these youth. Half of the male gang members reported being in a gang for 1 year or less, and only 7 percent reported being a gang member for all 4 years. Two-thirds (66 percent) of the females were in a gang for 1 year or less and none reported being a member for all 4 years (cited in Thornberry, Huizinga, and Loeber, 2004, p.10).

In contrast, the findings on the length of gang membership gathered on the UK arena in a Delinquent youth groups and offending behaviour: findings from the 2004 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey (Sharp et al., 2006) show a different picture. This report explored how big the problem is in England and Wales by studying the offending trajectories of adolescents who were aged between ten and nineteen and belonged to youth delinquent groups:

A fifth of respondents in DYGs said they had been with the group for less than a year; 17 per cent had been with the group for between one and two years; 39 per cent had been with the group for between two and five years. Almost a quarter (24%) of respondents in DYGs said they had been with their group for longer than five years (p.23).

First and foremost, one of the reasons behind the discrepancies is a different definition applied in both cases. Thornberry et al.’s Rochester study considered that those who simply admitted being a part of a gang actually were gang members. It was a plain application of a self-definition approach in order to spot the extent of gang membership without using any additional filters to narrow that group down. If we look at Sharp et al.’s OCJS estimates, applying a self-definition approach would lead to ten per cent of 10- to 19-year-olds being classified as “gang members” whereas when more restrictive criteria are used instead, this estimate drops from ten to six per cent and this is this more restrictive definition that the afore-presented quote from the report refers to. One has to bear in mind that differences in
these two cases are also caused by the fact that Thornberry et al. differentiated between males and females whereas in Sharpe et al.’s report there were no separate measures by gender.

Continuing with the problem of membership duration, what Klein and Maxson (2006) demonstrated was that the duration of membership in a gang was race and gender-dependent. There are more males than females ever joining a gang and also ethnic minorities are over-represented. This imbalance is magnified in criminal justice (as opposed to community) samples. What is the reason for men and those from ethnic minorities in particular being involved for longer periods of time?

First, it does seem that there is a strong relationship between the duration of gang membership and the availability of legitimate opportunities. Sullivan’s (1989) study of three separate racial communities in New York (Kontos and Brotherton, 2008) and the yet earlier, Suttle’s (1968) study of ethnic gangs in Chicago (Morselli, 2009) demonstrate that Black and Hispanic adolescents were far less integrated into networks associated with legitimate opportunities as compared to White adolescents. This results into a better chance for White young adults to secure a legitimate employment via an extensive network of positive contacts, which may be reflected in making a quicker decision to disengage from a gang (e.g., Hagedorn, 1998; Vigil, 2002).

Also, it is worth exploring whether there may be a significant relationship between the level of self-control and gang membership. Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) maintained that “adventurous and reckless children who have difficulty making and keeping friends tend to end up in the company of one another, creating groups made up of individuals who tend to lack self-control” (p.158). In brief, they found the interaction between the lack of self-control and the presence of crime opportunity to be the determinant factor behind one’s involvement in crime; and that gang members perceive risk of punishment as virtually lower than it actually is through the diffusion of responsibility. Having low self-control would also imply that the young people would simply not have the necessary skills that are vital for the successful transition out of gangs. Finally, regarding self-control as shaped in early years of life of an individual, the events in teenage and adult life such as getting married or finding employment would not be expected to have an impact on self-control because such fluctuations are not expected to take place.
Self-control is however far from being as permanent and stable a trait as Hirschi and Gottfredson (1995, 2001) had assumed, that is, a lot of people undergo changes in self-control beyond childhood, in absolute as well as relative terms. Schmeichel and Baumeister (2004) as well as van Dellen and Hoyle (2010) depicted self-control as a “resource” which may be both built up and diminished depending on the differences in conditions and experiences. Precisely, this research implies that self-control stores may be exhausted when the resources are strained by too much stress and/or worries but they may be as well replenished or reinforced when a change in personal circumstances occurs.

The outcome of perceiving self-control through the prism of a resource model is that we expect self-control to be less rigid than previously thought and variable in response to different events of transformative potential including marriage, becoming a parent or employment. They are likely to enable an individual to enhance his/her self-control and that in turn may have an effect on gang membership and encourage desistance. Interestingly, Fox, Lane and Akers (2013) run a survey among 2414 inmates from fourteen jails in Florida, which contained an array of questions related to inmates’ neighbourhood, self-control, criminal career and demographic, and family characteristics. Gang members exhibited a significantly lower rate of self-control as compared to non-gang members overall. Around one in four inmates characterised with very low self-control, one in five with medium-low self-control, one in eight with medium-high self-control and one in seventeen with very high self-control had joined a gang. While the numbers for “medium-high” and “very high” groups are smaller, it does not yet change the fact that also individuals with high levels of self-control join gangs. They are more likely to be core members in a gang and by implication more embedded in a gang and therefore less likely to desist from gang activity.

While some gang members are stable, that is, involved in gangs for long periods of time, the majority are only transient. There are several individuals’ characteristics such as high delinquency prior to gang entry, low level of self-control, living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood that are significantly related to the length of gang membership. Specifically, in terms of self-control, this correlation appears to be negative. This means that stable gang members are expected to display significantly lower levels of self-control as compared to transient gang members (Thornberry et al., 1993). Finally, Kissner and Pyrooz (2009) explored a relationship between gang membership and levels of self-control. They demonstrated that self-control did indeed induce a significant independent
effect on the probability of self-reported current gang membership but the effect was nonetheless quite small. What is more, it is even likely that the effect of self-control on gang membership disappears if self-control is scrutinised at the same time as an array of differential association measures, for example, those that tap familial gang membership. In order to ultimately unravel the complex link between self-control and the permanence of gang membership, future research should bring forward longitudinal data. It is vital if we want to fully grasp the latent significance of self-control theory for explaining gang desistance.

2.7.2 Embeddedness in a gang – when does “current” become “former”?

Can we ever take for granted that a given gang member is "former" and no more "current"? An evaluation of where the status of an individual as a gang member begins and comes to an end is challenged by definitional problems, which are multi-layered and far-reaching. The fact that an individual can be heard saying “I have given up this lifestyle. I am not a gang member no more” is one thing, but the problem is whether others (other members of the same gang, gang rivals, police) recognise this decision. In their study looking at group leaving, Ebaugh and Fuchs (1988) pinpointed the difficulties, which the individuals needed to face whilst exiting any group. No matter if the group was a religious order, a group of drug addicts and so on, a lot of individuals discovered that they were defined and addressed by their former groups and the public as still belonging to that group. Since self-perceptions play a major role in the context of one’s behaviour and are altered via relations with others, coming up with the means to create a new i.e. “an ex-gang member” identity and having it recognised by others is essential to the course of leaving a gang past behind.

Understandably, those who are less embedded in gangs are seen to desist at a faster pace than those who are more deeply embedded. It is therefore fundamentally important to be aware what is meant by the concept of “embeddedness” i.e. the extent to which individuals are involved in a gang. It signifies personal engagement in a durable deviant network and decreased engagement in pro-social networks. The relations can be understood through the prism of behaviours and/ or symbols. Pyrooz and Decker (2011) measured embeddedness by pooling six indicators among which were: involvement (expressing gang membership in appropriate clothing, having friends in a gang etc.), status (where the individual finds him/herself in the gang hierarchy) and identity (how important one perceives the gang to be in the context of his/her life). This resonates with Hirschi’s (1969) elements of the bond to
conventional society which include: attachment, commitment, involvement and belief; gangs are undoubtedly characterised with all four qualities just these bonds are directed towards a delinquent lifestyle. As a matter of fact, involvement in gangs has a detrimental effect on building relationships with pro-social networks. Deeper embeddedness in a gang implies that the confining strengths of the gang will also increase. Everyone has limits in both time and energy resources which can be devoted to the array of social arenas the individual functions in: meaning that if one invests more resources in a Social Network A, the potential investment in a Social Network B needs to be reduced (Moody and White, 2003) and this especially refers to the context of deviant social networks (Uggen and Thompson, 2003). As Finley (2011, p.109) highlighted: “gang members are emotionally committed to one another, are invested in one another, see one another as a reference group, spend a great deal of time interacting with one another and internalise specific group-based social norms”. For bonds with the gang to be broken or at least weakened and conventional bonds to be restored, all these elements have to be reworked. Once an individual exits a gang, this implies the steady decrease in gang embeddedness as the ties to active gang members are supposed to get weaker. Decker and Lauritsen (2002), and Bovenkerk (2011) suggested that moving to a different area (possibly, to a different city) helps new ex-gang members successfully complete desistance process as one finds him/herself further away from triggers. When viewed from this perspective, gang embeddedness, as stemming from the cumulative disadvantage: being poorly educated, not well trained for the legal job market and being socially excluded, renders the smooth and successful transition to adulthood a very daunting and challenging task to achieve. Energy spent on keeping a social link with the gang will rule out the potential increase in human and social capital in different life spheres including employment and education.

Involvement in a gang as well as disengagement from gang membership have usually been measured via self-report methods (Esbensen et al., 2001; Katz, Webb, and Decker, 2005) and considered as a binary state, that is, being in a gang versus not being involved in a gang. However, an enduring problem is that, quite frequently, individuals who left a gang some time ago still remain in touch with its members and preserve social ties. Consequently, it cannot be assumed that an individual who has self-reported as an ex-gang member does not have any lingering ties with former gang peers whatsoever. In sum, there is undoubtedly a fuzzy line for when the desistance process from a gang commences and when it terminates which makes further investigation of this issue essential. When viewed through the prism of self-report, an individual can be seen to be a former gang member but
this problem embodies the essence of difficulties with an agreed operational definition of a
"gang" (Esbensen et al., 2001; Klein and Maxson, 2006). Decker and Lauritsen (2002, p.66) explored the afore-mentioned lingering ties with a gang and concluded that naming someone an "ex-gang member" was a task more daunting than they had initially assumed precisely because of those ties: "self-described ex-gang members continue to report varying degrees of attachments and activities with others in the gang, and the process of disengagement is often gradual." When viewed from a life-course perspective, it is reasonable to assume that further into desistance process, the number of lingering ties to former gang peers decreases. It therefore seems that it is of vital importance to put these remaining ties with a gang under closer academic scrutiny as they have a potential to be the key to grasping the process of gang desistance.

2.7.3 Reasons for leaving a gang

2.7.3.1 Violence

Peterson et al. (2004) demonstrated that the rate of violent victimisation was higher for gang members before, during and after being in a gang as compared to their non-gang counterparts. Substantial amount of research has shown (e.g., Lauritsen, Sampson, and Laub, 1991, Shaffer and Ruback, 2002) that delinquent individuals are at greater risk of being victimised while gangs are “social groups organized around delinquency” (Miller, 1998, p.228). However, individuals may be able to put up with it only to some particular extent i.e. constant exposure to acts of violence may eventually surpass the threshold of tolerance (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996). When Decker and Van Winkle asked St. Louis former gang members why they had decided to exit a gang, there was one particular shared feature in all of their accounts: their primary motivation triggering the decision of exit was the experience of violence both on a personal level as well as indirectly (i.e. being victimised or witnessing some violent victimisation, see also Vigil, 1988, p.106–109). At first glance, this finding may appear to be surprising, as researchers have long perceived violence as a likely generator of cohesion between gang members. It is also quite paradoxical that self-protection from victimisation very often comes up as one of the reasons for joining a gang (Pitts, 2008). For instance, Everard (2006) pointed out that, in Glasgow, adolescents who were classified as gang members stated that “staying away from trouble” had been the main reason for joining a gang. To address this apparent

3 21 out of 24 young people responded to that question.
contradiction, Decker and Van Winkle (1996) distinguished two types of violence: socially cohesive and socially divisive. The so-called “internal” violence (e.g. initiation rites) and “mythic” violence (battles between gangs) are said to strengthen bonds between gang members but the effect of the afore-mentioned personal/indirect real violence is the opposite. Below, is one of the responses that Decker and Van Winkle (1996) received when asking the question “Why did you decide to leave the gang?”:

Well after I got shot, I got shot in my leg. You know how your life just flashes? It like did that so I stopped selling dope, got a job, stayed in school, just stopped hanging around cause one day I know some other gang member catch me and probably kill me (p.269).

When viewed from this perspective, negative life events may serve as triggers of transition to a positive life trajectory. Serious victimisation that has been for gang members the outcome of their own gang involvement may therefore act as a turning point in the direction of disengagement from gang activity. Gang exit is adaptive and affords an individual a chance to regain control over his/her life and to diminish the risk of future victimisation.

2.7.3.2 Legal sanctions

It is interesting and, at the same time, also quite surprising to note that former gang members’ accounts usually lack the reference to criminal punishment as a successful means to deter them from continued gang membership. To pinpoint the example: Watkins, Huebner and Decker (2008) analysed perceptual and demographic correlates potentially influencing the behaviour of possessing, carrying and using a firearm by juvenile and adult detainees. It was demonstrated that gang involvement had an especially strong effect among juveniles and it seemed to overshadow any impact of perceptual deterrence. On the other hand, Maxson, Matsuda and Hennigan (2011) observed gang members to be particularly responsive to the potential sanctions for vehicle theft. However, it appears on the whole that the lack of prevalent fear of sanctions may be down to the nature of social processes occurring in gangs: gangs establish their values, principles, create their own “gang culture” all of which embodies “an institutionalized rejection of the values of adult authority” (Moore and Vigil, 1989, p.31; see also Fleisher, 1998; Klein, 1995). Additionally, releasing gangs-focused policy documents on a frequent basis may backfire at policymakers simply because giving gangs special attention is likely to carry two main side effects. First, it may serve as a boost to their status and second, gang members’ identification with their gang is likely to solidify yet more (Klein, 1995). Overall, the
above observations challenge traditional punitive policies (being “tough on crime”), which seek to discourage adolescents from gang membership via criminal justice sanctions. This brings us back to the earlier-discussed issue of self-control of gang members. Most studies do not provide much evidence of an interaction between the perceived sanction risk and self-control. Both Wright et al. (2004) and Wikström (2007) showed that the perceived sanction risk did not affect all adolescents to the same extent. It specifically influenced crime-prone individuals but did not appear to play a similar role for those individuals who were characterised with a low-rate propensity to offend (individuals high in morality and self-control). On the other hand, Pauwels et al. (2011) did not manage to replicate the effect of the perceived sanction risk on propensity to offend, which is the finding in concordance with the earlier-given examples i.e. a fear of being caught does not appear to be significantly related to one’s decision regarding gang exit.

Whether an individual decides to exit a gang for any of the reasons presented above or for a yet different reason, an actual execution of that decision is never easy. In many cases, leaving a gang means losing that sense of reference and protection and those who were the enemies at the time of gang membership are there to stay (as also observed in this study). Moreover, other than coping with that, an individual needs to, above all, find ways to secure his/ her maintenance. If the family can be relied upon for support, the re-integration process may feel more achievable but that support from pro-social others cannot always be found. It is therefore vital that other sources of support exist that can offer tailor-made interventions facilitating sustained desistance, which is the focus of the next section.

2.8 Practical support with gang exit

Both gang entry and gang exit are complex processes where there is a multitude of factors playing a role. Therefore, any practical approach or intervention also needs to specifically respond to these issues present at a given time. Moreover, taking into account the needs, which the gang fulfils in the eyes of gang members, any type of support must pick up on or even go beyond the incentives that being in a gang supposedly offers. Doing so, it must get rid of negative after-effects ascribed in gang membership. When viewed from this perspective, what an effective exit programme needs to start with is tackling the underlying causes of gang membership by recognising at the individual level an array of potential risk factors (family, community and so on). Second, by whichever means a gang had been fulfilling the needs of an individual, the programme needs to offer legitimate substitutes
(MacRae-Krisa, 2013). Hastings et al. (2011) also emphasised the importance of focusing on how to resolve problems that hinder the re-adaptation of an individual to conventional society, which include most importantly: employment, education and re-bonding with pro-social others. Specifically, Hastings et al. put forward a list of relevant issues, which any youth gang exit intervention should address in order to increase its efficacy. These are:

1. Providing youth with a safe place to go – a great number of young people who want to leave gangs are afraid to do so because they do not have the opportunity to move out from the area and having to stay in the same area puts them at risk of retaliation from the people they had used to associate with.

2. Individual counselling and cognitive-behavioural development – there are some risk factors which seem to be more prevalent than others and come up in many narratives of former gang members but it does not change the fact that every person should be looked at very individually and supported with a strategy uniquely tailored to his/ her needs. An effective exit programme should work on the individual’s anti-social attitudes and provide an opportunity for self-understanding and self-improvement. There is another very important point to be made here. Many researchers (Hoang, 2007; Totten, 2009) highlight that men and women have their unique risk and protective factors, which should be reflected in any exit strategy that is being developed. As men generally make up the majority in gangs, more often than not, it is inadequate to apply the same action plan with every person; “programs that do not capture gender differences may result in services that inadequately or ineffectively address the needs of females” (Hoang, 2007, p.31). Poor economic and social opportunities by implication often make female gang members face “multiple marginality” (p.32).

3. Education, training and job opportunities – A lot of former gang members mention “quick and easy money” as one of the reasons for which they had ended up in a gang in the first place. Leaving a gang may be difficult if they had never had a legal job and had not finished their education. In that case, they feel they only have two options: either to stay in a gang and earn that illegal money or to leave a gang and rely on state money. Consequently, helping gang members by putting them back into education and offering the chance of training which could potentially lead to stable employment are vital in promoting successful desistance.

4. Peer mentoring – As I have mentioned above, the individually tailored approach is very important but ideally this one-to-one work should be accompanied by effective group-based work. Being in a group gives the chance of mutual sharing
of past experiences, endorsing each other’s reality and building one’s self-esteem\(^4\) by being of help to other members in a group. If, as an individual, you are challenged about your behaviour in a supportive environment, this can prove to be very eye opening and promote the change process. Finally, if such group sessions are led or at least facilitated by successful former gang members, this may make wishing-to-be-ex gang members better internalise the teachings than if they mainly came from those who they do not share any common features with.

5. Addressing social determinants of health – It also happens very often that young people need the support in the form of alcohol and drug abuse treatment, mental health care or family services which would help restore broken pro-social bonds.

Last but not least, certain young people need support at a very practical level, that is, help with securing housing, getting food and income support.

On top of these five key components, Hastings adds one more – suppression – which is of course relevant but when we talk about public interventions and not support as coming from the voluntary sector. The strategies, which embody this feature, may be either coercive or alternative, or both. The former type puts emphasis on punishment and imprisonment of gang members. The latter strategy incorporates community policing and conciliatory measures to promote desistance from gangs.

Last but not least, Evans and Sawdon (2004), who did focus on a Toronto gang exit strategy, did add two other components. First, they pinpointed the importance of adequate assessment and intake. Before an individual is admitted to any programme, his/ her interest and motivation should be determined. When we deal with self-referrals, this does not make that much of a problem as we would not expect an individual voluntary approaching the programme provider if his/ her motivation was low. However, when young people are referred by for instance social services, their interest and motivation may not necessarily be at the optimum level so that needs careful evaluation. Also, the nature of gang activity needs to be assessed and the social and family background should be scrutinised. This is all

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\(^4\) “Building self-esteem” seems to feature as a key constituent of both gang prevention as well as gang intervention programmes. For instance, BoyztoMEN is a London-based charity that works with boys and young men involved/ at risk of involvement in gangs. Charity mentors model alternative, that is, positive masculinity and strive to address young men’s emotional issues and raise their self-esteem. Similarly, Reality Bytes works with young women involved in gangs and affected by gang violence; mentoring-based, it aims at building women’s self-esteem, personal responsibility and aspirations. However, the problem with these and other programmes I came across is that there is no evaluation regarding the extent to which these initiatives do actually lead to an effective building of self-esteem.
necessary in order to be able to single out individual risk factors and consequently to tailor an approach suited to individual needs. Second, Evans and Sawdon refer to the quality of case management highlighting that young people should be supported on an on-going basis in achieving their goals and plans, mentored and assisted in handling everyday challenges such as housing or substance abuse problems. Finally, I would add to this long list the importance of the follow-up. Once an individual has dropped out of the programme, the practitioner should make an effort to follow up with such a person whether it is by making a telephone call or a home visit. This level of practitioner’s commitment is likely to have an effect on a young person’s attitude and may well give him confidence and encourage to go back, and to complete a programme.

Importantly, the suggestions above are all the “shoulds” of the gang programmes, the features that are devised based on what has not worked so far. Klein and Maxson (2006) reviewed 58 US-based programmes from all three areas: prevention, intervention and suppression. In great majority, these have not been independently evaluated to check for their effectiveness. The authors emphasise that some of them have potential or are prospectively successful, but there is no actual, empirical data to pinpoint how many or which. Additionally, most of the programmes referred to appear to have a very narrow scope and address the gang issues selectively. This does not promise sustainable changes in the context, where the problems are deep and multiple. We also learn that using suppression approaches on their own creates more problems rather than tackles them and is not preventative either. They may lead to a short-term drop in gang-related crime but the underlying psychosocial issues such as anger problems, mental health, substance abuse and so on are not addressed. Similarly to the earlier-mentioned recommendations by Hastings (2011), Klein and Maxson believe that suppression initiatives should only be used in conjunction with intervention programmes. And with regard to these, the crucial element is “to learn how to target which members for which type of intervention.” Last but not least, the important take-away message is that, in any case, those who work with vulnerable youth need in the first instance adequate training to be able to learn to recognise that every young person’s needs are different and that professionals shall work cohesively together to build shared knowledge.

What has just been presented in relation to key features of successful programmes supporting male and female gang-members in their desistance efforts is one issue. Another issue is availability of pregnancy and teen parenthood support to this group of severely disadvantaged young people. It is a well-known fact that the amount of support and
education available to young mothers is far more extensive than that targeted at young fathers. However, while main concern is largely with the mother, analogous attention should be paid to fathers. We can surely make several assumptions about young fathers. They are not in any way prepared for the change parenthood is going to bring, they are concerned about losing their freedom and having to adjust their routines. They are usually taken by surprise with news and they are simply scared. They may well have very good intentions and a strong desire to stay involved with a child and his/ her mother but simply very often do not have even a faintest idea what it means to be a father. This occurs especially with young fathers who were brought up by either single mothers (in households where a biological father was absent) or a male figure was present (mother’s partner) but cannot be considered in any case as a role model. One needs to remember that fathers are in no case less important to family wellbeing as compared to mothers. However, what we do know is that a great deal of young expectant fathers, especially disadvantaged ones like gang-members feel completely left out during their partners’ pregnancies (Widarssson et al., 2012). If young fathers do not get adequate attention, education and they are not made to believe that they do matter, it should be of no surprise that some of them eventually end up drifting away from their paternal responsibilities. Sheriff (2007, p.2) referred to very poignant words of one teenage pregnancy worker who said: “If you can engage young fathers-to-be before their baby is born, you can sow the seeds, whereas coming in later is much harder.” There is therefore no question that appropriate education and support must be made available not only to teenage mothers but also to teenage fathers (Leite, 2007).

2.9 Summary

This part of the Literature Review has demonstrated that the process of desistance from a gang is very intricate and loaded with conceptual, definitional and empirical uncertainties. Three key theoretical approaches, which have been most influential in desistance research have also been presented: Sampson and Laub’s theory of informal social control, Giordano et al.’s theory of cognitive transformation and identity theory developed by Paternoster and Bushway on the one hand, and Maruna on the other. I explained the reasons for relying primarily on Maruna’s approach. In brief, I emphasised how it appreciates an individual as a whole as well as one’s subjective roles and endeavours. Presenting desisters as active agents who make conscious choices rather than as passive recipients of things happening to them, Maruna’s narrative approach offers a more rounded explanation and a psychological insight into desistance process.
The decision of gang exit normally comes about as a consequence of multiple factors, which push and pull an individual away from the gang. One does not shed the identity of a gang member overnight, the process of reaching the decision is usually lengthy as well as lengthy is the knifing-off process following gang disengagement. And it is vulnerable to disruptions. One needs to remember that desistance from one identity means that it has become less salient; it does not disappear completely but remains dormant. Without both an alternate support structure and geographical detachment from the circumstances that had contributed to gang joining in the first place, the former gang member’s new, reworked identity is at high risk of relapse.

After the de-identification with a gang, desisters revisit their links to the gang as a whole, to their gang peers and rework their identity so it is compatible with their new, pro-social life role. This is usually accompanied by a more critical analysis of past behaviours, a high degree of meaning-making and taking a different person’s perspective. During that time, we can also observe a lot of former gang members becoming more agentic in their pursuits, taking ownership of the future and taking up activities implying generativity and offering more chance of self-actualisation (Maruna and Roy, 2007).

It was also emphasised that desistance from a gang (from the identity of a gang-member) and desistance from crime (behavioural correlate), although linked (gangs produce a strong facilitation effect on delinquency), are still conceptually different. What we should promote is the combination of the two, that is, support those who wish to leave their gang not only in the de-identification process but also in them leaving offending. In the end, we cannot talk about secondary desistance if somebody has left their gang but still carries on offending.

Finally, with regard to gang exit programmes, at the individual level, they above all strive for increasing desisters’ social and cognitive skills, building their self-esteem, teaching them self-control and how to make productive decisions in life. At the family level, young people work on improving or even rebuilding productive relationships with pro-social others. At the community level, they are encouraged to “pay back” for the support they are being provided with by getting involved in generative pursuits. Importantly, they are also given an opportunity to acquire employability skills throughout training so they gain a chance of finding legitimate employment. Last but not least, young people must feel they are now receiving what they had looked for via gang membership – primarily, a sense of belonging and close-knit circle of support.
The following chapter, Chapter Three, makes the second section of the Literature Review and looks at the concept of parenthood, how it has changed over time and the empirical research that has investigated the link between the experience of parenthood and desistance from crime and/or disengagement from gangs.
Chapter Three: Literature Review – Part 2

3.1 Parenthood and criminal desistance

According to the age-graded theory of social control (Sampson and Laub, 2003), changes in offending patterns throughout the life-course may be to a certain extent accounted for by transformations occurring in social bonds and in informal control. The nature and source of social control both alter as individuals experience life-course transitions serving as potential turning points. Marriage and first-time parenthood have been put forward as such life-changing events. Family-wise, marriage has been seen as one of the most prominent transitions in adulthood having an effect on criminal careers. Parenthood, on the other hand, has been quite rarely in the foreground as one of the turning-points although Sampson and Laub (2003, p.135) pinpointed that “parenting responsibilities lead to changes in routine activities as more and more time is spent in family-centered activities rather than unstructured time with peers (…) Along with changing routine activities, having children can also influence a person’s identity and sense of maturation”. Parenthood supposedly activates the same structures, which have been seen to play the role in the case of marriage effect, namely: the increase in informal social control, restructuring routine activities, increased behavioural self-awareness and, eventually, identity transformation. Being a parent as well channels energy to conformity because more is at stake (Edin, Nelson, and Paranal, 2004). And if these life changes occur simultaneously, that is, as “the complete respectability package” (Giordano et al., 2002, p.1013), the effect is cumulative and therefore the chance of sustained desistance increases.

Speaking of social control with regard to parenthood may seem questionable as it is, by and large, difficult to imagine that small children may have any direct social control over their parents (Giordano et al., 2002). Nonetheless, children may have an effect on social support their father or mother will get as taking on the new role of a parent is likely to generate new attitudes and expectations from both family and friends. Being a parent is a role that has a more public character than being someone’s spouse and there is also more agreement on what “should be there” in order for someone to be considered as a “good parent”; being a responsible caregiver and continued criminal behaviour are mutually exclusive.

Looking at the theoretical portrayal of the relationship between parenthood and criminal behaviour, it is also worth referring to the General Strain Theory (GST) (Agnew, 1992,
According to Agnew, children may prompt their parents to carry on committing crime if parents see them as a source of strain and any attempts of building a quality relationship end in vain. This is likely to lead to the build-up of very many strongly negative emotions including anger, frustration and so on, which may eventually be channelled into further offending. The GST argument is important as it implies that the quality of the parent-child relationship has a role to play meaning that if this quality is low, parents will be more likely to carry on with crime as compared to parents who have a quality relationship with their children or couples without children. Also, GST would imply that parents’ response to strain would differ depending on coping skills, social/family support at-hand and lingering ties with their former criminal peers.

However, while academics exploring salient events such as getting married are likely to believe that individuals take up these roles purposely and decisively, the same does not have to apply when one becomes a parent. Several quantitative studies investigating the link between parenthood and crime have just focused on what influence the fact of becoming a parent had on crime rather than on the effect of living with a child or other ways of showing one’s involvement in parenting (e.g., Blokland and Nieuwbeerta, 2005; Warr, 1998). Conceptual issues may thus account for the fact why a number of studies have not managed to demonstrate a beneficial effect of parenthood on an individual’s behavioural pattern. Possibly, particularly for fathers, looking at parenthood from the very basic perspective may not essentially entail even the smallest commitment to the role.

There is also yet another argument that would support the statement about the lack of the positive effect of children on their parents’ offending. If we take the afore-discussed GST theory on board together with a rational choice approach, we can claim that the birth of a child may likely encourage a parent to commit crime particularly if this is a crime directed at financial gain. When viewed from this perspective, children epitomise a necessity to make money for parents who are already in an underprivileged position. For instance, Uggen and Thompson (2003) in their study of illegal earnings, demonstrated that intra-individual change in substance misuse affected illegal earnings to a far greater extent as compared to other factors including getting married or finding a satisfying job. Overall, the instant money-based strain related to just-becoming a parent can possibly offset both the wish to stay away from crime and to be a good parent, and the effect of the informal social control of a good quality child – parent relationship.

While these theoretical stands apply to both males and females, it is likely that there will be gender differences when comparing their reactions to pregnancy, childbirth and then
upbringing of children as social roles and expectations related to fatherhood vary from those related to motherhood (Cowdery and Knudson-Martin, 2005).

3.2 Likely factors influencing the relationship in question

3.2.1 Gender differences?

Adolescent fathers and mothers merit special attention at least due to the fact that at the time of greatest identity development, they are virtually unprepared for a parental role. Katz-Wise, Priess and Hyde (2010) suggested that mothers’ and fathers’ reactions to their new life roles as parents are likely to be different due to gender-based differences in anticipated social roles. Starting with pregnancy, the experience of this period will typically differ for fathers and mothers at least because this is an intense time of physical change for women. To give an example, Draper (2003, p. 70) stated that “[the pregnancy’s] embodied knowledge forms an important component of her transition to motherhood. However, such changes do not accompany a man’s transition to fatherhood”. Nonetheless, if a father-to-be positively embraces the period of pregnancy and then the childbirth, and its aftermath, this constitutes a prominent occasion to reformulate one’s social identity (Meadows-Oliver et al., 2007) and the time of a profound identity change should be a “sensitive” period for desistance to occur. Then, when a child is born, childcare responsibilities are hugely time-consuming and often require parents to alter their usual everyday routines. Changes in time-use patterns are usually more notable for women (Gauthier and Furstenbeg, 2002) as in the majority of cases responsibility for child-rearing is in mothers’ hands, with the emphasis on a child’s first year of life (Ellingsaeter and Leira, 2006; Hearn, 2002). It has to be admitted that fathers’ time investment in child-care has been a more frequent phenomenon in the last few decades but still the mother is typically regarded as a main carer (Feeney et al., 2001) or, in the case of teenage mothers, the mother’s mother is often, if not the principal, one of the caregivers. The small-scale U.S. study by Dallas et al. (2000) on seven young mothers and their partners demonstrated that mothers differed from fathers when it came to the perception of what sort of activities fathers were supposed to get involved in with their children. Mothers tended to concentrate on whether a father was actively involved in child-care or not and also tended to mention that the division of parenting tasks was not proportionate and far too much responsibility was on their shoulders. The study by McAuley et al. (2004) showed that the feeling of too much responsibility for parenting tasks was not uniquely the problem as seen by teenage mothers and that mothers from a broad spectrum of age (17-42) shared the same view.
Bearing in mind the importance of changes in routine activities as a factor contributing to desistance from crime, parenthood may therefore serve as an especially prominent turning point for women.

### 3.2.2 Relationship between the child’s parents

One also needs to remember that how and at what pace routine activities change likely depends on whether a child’s parents live together. If they do not co-habit, a child most often stays with a mother and there is naturally less contact between a father and a child hence routine activities of a father will be affected to a lesser extent. Consequently, it is very important to separate the parenthood effect from the effect of relationship between the parents (marriage/ cohabitation/ living apart/ not together any more, e.g., Farrington and West, 1995), which may be difficult when parents are married/ co-habit and the effects of marriage and parenthood are interconnected and co-existent. Relationship status between the parents also points towards key selection mechanisms. Primarily, becoming a parent within marriage, non-formalised relationship or when living apart are in some way related to different periods during the life course. Specifically, becoming a parent, when there is no stable relationship between the parents, occurs more often earlier than later in life (late teenage years or young adulthood) and, consequently, differences in age may be reflected in the context of childbirth. Relatedly, systematic differences are likely to take place between those individuals for whom parenthood occurs within a marriage and cohabitation, and those for whom it does not occur within a long-lasting relationship. Finally, it is also important whether a child was intended or not. It seems sound to advocate that when a child is born within a stable relationship including marriage, this is more likely to be intended than when it is born outside a co-residential partnership. Due to time constraints imposed on the fieldwork, the research sample in this study comprised parents who were in a relationship and those who were not. I was not able to uniquely recruit either those in a stable relationship (marriage/ cohabitation) or those individuals who were not in a relationship with the other parent of their child, which would have allowed for better disentangling the parenthood effect from the relationship effect.

### 3.2.3 Quality of the parent-child relationship

It should be kept in mind that what plays the decisive role in the parenthood effect is the quality of the relationship between a parent and a child rather than just a mere presence of
children. We expect this effect to be the most marked for teenage, unmarried and crime-involved parents. It is for the reason that such parents do not have as much attachment to conventional society, are likely to socialise with those who share similar characteristics and, finally, find it more difficult to legitimately handle stresses and pressure created by children. It can be therefore suggested that, for such parents, a low-quality parent-child relationship is more likely to give rise to criminal behaviour by challenging parents’ already fragile bonds with conventional society; to make them socialise yet more with antisocial others (within circles of mutual support) and to strain their limited life skills. In the same way, a high-quality relationship supposedly has the opposite effect, possibly reducing involvement in crime among these parents. This very specific group has more at stake from establishing a deep relationship than those individuals who are older, married, have less criminal propensity and have attachment to conventional society and pro-social others. It is uncertain whether the effect of relationship quality may be more substantial for fathers or mothers. It can be hypothesised that a low-quality relationship will be seen by females as a greater strain and affect them more than males because most often they hold more responsibility for raising children and they tend to find their relationships with other people as more important than males do (Giordano et al., 2002). However, at the same time, involvement with a child is time-consuming, which should limit mothers’ opportunities for offending and hanging around with criminal peers. These apparently opposite effects do not help making a valid prediction whether a low-quality parent-child relationship will be more likely to play a role in persistence in crime among women or men but, undoubtedly, gender is a variable that deserves further interest.

3.3 Parenthood in research to date

3.3.1 Fatherhood

It was not until a decade ago that the adolescent parenthood literature put the issue of fatherhood under closer academic scrutiny. Before, the research had been characterised with a major gender imbalance strongly favouring mothers (Bunting and McAuley, 2004; Strug and Wilmore-Schaeffer, 2003). Not doing justice to the role of fathers may result from a no-longer valid perception of fathers as irrelevant to the psychosocial development of a child or simply from widespread beliefs about the leading role credited to mothers. Either way, fathers have been virtually invisible in research literature and very often what was known and repeated originated from mothers’ accounts (Hendricks and Montgomery,
Far too often, this striking gap in research has been superficially approached through repetition of various stereotypes and pejorative myths.

One of the studies examining fatherhood as a turning point comes from Edin, Nelson and Paranal (2004). Studying a sample of 300 low-income fathers (non-custodial and having a criminal record) coming from two cities in the U.S., they demonstrated that fatherhood might serve as a turning point in the lives of male offenders. One of the participants, a nineteen-year old man, spoke in the following way about the effect that the birth of his daughter had on his life:

She changed my life a lot. I was headed down the wrong path. I grew up on the streets, everything from drugs to this and that. [...] But ever since she’s been born, I slowed down a lot. You know... ‘Cause it's like, before her, I didn’t really care too much about anything. [...] But as of now, I’m living every day for today and tomorrow (p.54).

According to many interviewed fathers, who maintained at least some sort of contact with their children, childbirth was like a salvation. For some, the transformation occurred already with the birth of a first child, for others not until subsequent children were born. Great majority also believed that they would have been far worse without their children – becoming a father effectively discouraged them from further offending. While fatherhood did not happen to be conducive to desistance in every man, the study undoubtedly showed that father-child bonding provided an opportunity of life-course change. Also, Florsheim and Ngu (2006) noted that fatherhood might serve as a “wake-up” call for young men from disadvantaged communities who, since they had become fathers, managed to pull themselves together. It is worth noting that there was no causal link between that positive end result and attitudes towards fatherhood held at the time of pregnancy (for instance some adolescent fathers studied were actually imprisoned around the time their children were born); it was not until later when they really experienced that “wake-up” call. Last but not least, in Kerr et al. (2011), it was showed that males’ self-reported offending had dropped after they had become parents for the first time. The change went beyond anticipated developmental patterns in crime desistance and the well-established effect of marriage.

In terms of psychological well-being following the birth of a child, teenage fathers are significantly more prone to undergo severe stress and several psychological difficulties including problems with self-esteem, anxiety, depression or sense of isolation than these
teenage males who are not fathers (Thompson and Crase, 2004). The major problem with Thompson and Crase’s study however is that we do not know how much of this was pre-existing – the study data was not longitudinal but was collected from only one interview with each participant. Fagan, Bernd and Whiteman (2007) observed that stress implied by teenage parenting was in a negative relationship with fathers’ engagement in parental responsibilities. On top of that, adolescent fathers are also subject to lower educational achievements (e.g. earlier drop-out from school) and have less potential when it comes to employment (Bunting and Mcauley, 2004; Glikman, 2004). The difficulty that most young men have whilst seeking employment, which will provide for the new family, and the difficulty with building human and social capital make positive fathering behaviours more difficult to achieve, even despite the fact that a substantial number of fathers strive to do so (Glikman, 2004). Some research (Nelson, Torres, and Edin, 2002; Roy, 2006) has suggested that certain adolescent males from low-income backgrounds could be actively seeking fatherhood in order to imbue their lives with some existential meaning and subsequently to build up an adult identity. The circle however seems to be a vicious one i.e. on the one hand, they may want to become fathers but on the other hand, as it has been afore-mentioned, they are very often unable to fulfil “breadwinning responsibilities” and this brings about negative ramifications for their psychological health and emotional wellbeing (Johnson, 2001). It has to be admitted that this problem has been recognised in the recent years when planning intervention efforts as more and more of these interventions find crucial to augment paternal involvement by means of financial support and opportunities (Lane and Clay, 2000; Weinman, Smith, and Buzi, 2002).

After a man becomes a father, he is expected to “launch” his paternal package: to be there to support their child emotionally and financially, to provide physical care, to be devoted, accessible and responsible. Overall, a father is supposed to act as someone whom the children will look up to, as a role model through what he does and says (Pleck and Masciadrelli, 2004). These idealised selves are accompanied by the beliefs one has about his potential and future. In the study by Johnson (2001), the statements made by teenage fathers demonstrated that their actual performance as fathers did not match their idealised expectations of paternal behaviour they had had beforehand. As a result of this discrepancy, these adolescent fathers were struggling to depict likely ways of positive involvement as fathers given the obvious circumstantial obstacles of being one. They relied upon both past experiences and current environmental factors when attempting to establish more likely possible selves as fathers (Oyserman and Saltz, 1993). They would make
comparisons of their own behaviours and reflections with those of significant others (e.g. family of origin, peers, especially those who were fathers themselves) to construct their concepts of parenthood. At times, it happens though that there is no overlap between models acquired from the family of origin or peers and the young father’s possible/idealised paternal self. Then, young people cannot really experience the template of a socially acclaimed model of parenting and need to work out themselves the optimal parenting model.

Nonetheless, in the case of teenage and young adult fathers who are of interest in this study, they tend to be depicted as "hit and run victimizers who father children without any commitment to paternal support" (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1982). There are several examples of studies the findings of which seem to fit into this approach. One is Miller’s (1998) study, where teenage fathers were depicted as lacking any sort of enthusiasm to actively participate in the lives of their children. Also, according to Strug and Wilmore-Schaeffer (2003), adolescent fathers not only lacked that willingness but they were not capable of fulfilling their parental responsibilities. Last but not least, Parikh (2005) reinforced this popular stereotype of an evasion of responsibility resulting from the indifference to the child’s birth. It seems that avoidance of such behaviours and embracing exaggerated masculinity may culminate during teenage years following the process of identity transformation and peer pressure. An ambivalent approach towards fatherhood may also be affected by the effect of uncertain autonomy. This is characteristic of adolescence and the demands implied by becoming a parent put this sense of autonomy at major risk. It must be admitted however that this widespread stereotyping is detrimental – it pathologises the image of teenage fatherhood (Arai, 2003) and labels these young men: “immature”, “selfish” and “insensitive to a child’s needs”. Studies differentiating teen fathers from teen non-fathers via the identification of “risk” factors including poverty, low educational attainment, low self-esteem and weak family bonding (Thornberry, Smith, and Howard, 1997; Winstanley, Meyers, and Florsheim, 2002) only reinforce this view.

Last but not least, we can also come across the studies that demonstrate a link between affirmation of conventional masculine beliefs and endorsement of adolescent pregnancy, and fatherhood among young males (Goodyear, Newcomb, and Allison, 2000; Marsiglio, 1993). Only very few academics have however investigated in greater detail whether those adolescents who advocate (hyper)-masculinised behaviours and perspectives show less involvement during pregnancy and/or are little involved after child-birth. The rare exception is here Anderson’s (1999) ethnographic research on “decent and street” families.
Adolescent males living in that background were struggling whilst finding a balance between a “father” identity and a “street male” identity. Those teenage males who were defending the latter identity type were considered as more prone to make a girl pregnant as an attempt to boost their manhood and to stand by the streets’ code. Consequently, there was little likelihood of them staying involved with the baby’s mother if the parents of either side were not providing support. Marsiglio (1993) depicted teenage fathers as feeling obliged to take responsibility for their children and in Rhein et al.’s (1997) study, 54% of teenage fathers (N=173) and 70% of teenage mothers’ partners were seen to meet the definition of being involved in child upbringing.

Framing a picture of teenage fatherhood in a negative light also draws attention away from cases of successful fathering in which positive father-child relationships are built (Miller, 1998). Among examples of studies that attempt to unsettle the stereotypes are for instance the early study by Hendricks and Montgomery (1983) in which they demonstrated that teenage fathers were in the majority accommodating towards fatherhood. Even though it is understandable that teenage fathers are likely to face various obstacles, which may hamper their involvement with a child, Allen and Doherty (1996) demonstrated in their research on African American fathers that they were very adamant about playing an active part in their children’s upbringing. The majority of interviewed men believed that, in contrast to their own fathers, they were coping fairly well. Violent and/ or absent fathers are often mentioned in the context of being the source of a great deal of young men’s terrible childhood experiences (e.g., Shade et al., 2011). Some young fathers were ambivalent about a dearth of commitment from their own fathers and that seemed to motivate them to be deeply involved with their children. They wanted something different for their children; they had a strong desire to become positive role models that they themselves never had had. What came up quite often in young men’s narratives was therefore the belief that “being there” for your children was vital and young men used it in two different contexts: of being there for the birth or/ and being actively engaged in building a relationship with their child. It is a major event if a father is present at childbirth as it announces to others his desire to take at least some of the responsibility and to establish, and to develop a bond with the child. Fathers, who miss this moment because, for instance, they are in prison, lose a great opportunity, which may eventually negatively impact on their emotional and financial contribution.

Another prevalent theme was “responsibility” but it must be noted that young fathers
meant that mainly with regard to their child and not necessarily the child’s mother. Some young men came across as overpowered by multiple paternal duties but they all agreed that fathers were as central to family well being as mothers were and that financial and emotional support was fundamental to the concept of fatherhood. Fathers described their involvement with children as substantial. Above all, they were contributing financially (food, clothing) through their part-time jobs and strived to take at least some responsibility for looking after the children. Some of them did recognise the fact that they had become fathers too early but, at the same time, they felt deep connection with the child and overall considered fatherhood as a “blessing” which gave a meaning to their lives. As in other examples mentioned here, young fathers frequently pointed to a tense relationship with the child’s mother as the key challenge to their greater involvement with their children. Last but not least, a very important example is also the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study by McLanahan et al. (2003), which found that around 90 percent of unmarried fathers, which is a vast majority, put forward emotional and financial support towards their child and the child’s mother during pregnancy and, on average, eight in ten young males also visited both in a hospital after birth. Importantly, against popular stereotypes, most men were not thinking of running away from their paternal responsibilities as soon as they had learnt that they would become fathers (e.g., Hamer, 2001). Currently, we witness the raising amount of evidence, which portrays young males as willingly embracing the experience of fatherhood rather than trying to flee from it, at least at the beginning (e.g., Edin, Tach, and Mincy, 2009; Hamer, 2001).

Being capable of providing financial security for the family is one of the most essential manifestations of masculinity in the society. Consequently, the fact that teenage fathers are virtually unable, or able to some very limited extent, to provide financially for their partner and the child seems to be yet another reason for their ambivalent feelings and even disinterest in fatherhood (Shade et al., 2011; Shannon and Abrams, 2007). Apart from financial resources, another major contextual factor that impacts on young fathers’ involvement in their responsibilities is the relationship with the child’s mother (Bunting and Mcauley, 2004; Futris and Schoppe-Sullivan, 2007). An average disadvantaged young male becomes a father for the first time following a relationship, which is fairly brief. Edin et al.’s study (2007) founded on an exhaustive longitudinal qualitative analysis of a group of forty-eight couples from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study (who had children together but were not married) demonstrated that a reasonably high number of fathers had considered their relationship as “serious” before pregnancy was found out.
Exactly half (i.e. 24) males called their relationships “casual” and they were more likely to do so than their female partners. Likewise, Roy (2008) found out in his study of disadvantaged minority fathers that the relationships, which ended up in pregnancy were quite random and therefore the children born as a result had been rarely overtly planned.

In point of fact, we do not have as much information on the dynamics of a relationship within a couple during pregnancy. Most research relevant to that issue is of retrospective nature – relies on the data collected when a child has already been born and is based mainly on female accounts (Edin and Kefalas, 2005). This implicitly suggests that the pregnancy period may be fairly turbulent and beset with major relationship issues including for instance domestic violence. A lot of couples with such problems at least try to patch things up before the childbirth and try to stay together for the sake of a child (Edin, Kefalas, and Reed, 2004). The quality of the relationship between the parents (when the relationship is still on-going as well as when it has ended) also substantially influences to what extent the father is involved with his children (Carlson, McLanahan, and England, 2004). For unmarried men, the extent to which they are involved depends on whether they live together with the child’s mother. Usually, if they do not co-habit, there is less contact between fathers and their children (Kitterod and Lyngstad, 2011) and such a father is more likely to keep his routine activities unchanged.

It does not happen often enough for parents to be able to co-parent that is to learn sharing childcare responsibilities but when it happens, this generally implies more contact between a father and his child and of higher quality (Sobolewski and King, 2005). Actually, Kost (2001) in his study of low-income fathers demonstrated that the amount and quality of fathers’ involvement in paternal activities with their offspring was substantially hindered if the access to their children lacked regularity and routine. If a mother has custody of a child, she often tends to play the role of a “gatekeeper” either making a non-residential father’s involvement possible or holding it back (Buchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbusch, 1996). Whether the relationship is on-going or not, she is usually more likely to cut down a father-child contact when she is through turbulent times with a child’s father (Waller and Swisher, 2006). Yet, in another study, Furstenberg and Harris (1993) looked at 400 African-American teenage mothers and how they perceived the intensity of paternal involvement over time. It was demonstrated that only the minority of non-resident fathers maintained the contact with their children; at the five-year follow up, not more than 20% of children were in a regular contact with their fathers. When data was collected at the 20-year follow-up, it was highlighted that only 9% of the children interviewed had lived with
their fathers all that time until they turned 18. On average, children lived with their fathers for 5 years and that mostly coincided with the first years of a child’s life. There are two main points that come out of these findings: first, relationships between teenage mothers and fathers are most often very vulnerable and second, once such a sensitive relationship breaks down, this is frequently accompanied by the gradual decrease in father’s involvement.

The effects of fatherhood on crime trajectories have not been usually explored independently of marriage effects or at least have not been proved (e.g., Blokland and Nieuwbeerta, 2005). Exploratory analyses (not without flaws) have given a boost to the assumption that if a father lives together with his children, this partially accounts for the fatherhood effect. This means that fathers committed less crime during the time when they were permanently living with their children and after explaining this effect, the link between first-time fatherhood and consequent changes in a criminal behaviour pattern was not significant any more. Interestingly, the decrease in offending after one had become a father was noted across the entire age spectrum (206 at-risk males assessed annually from age 12 up to 31). However, a rapid drop in crime was more pronounced for older as compared to younger first-time fathers. For younger men, fatherhood was therefore more often a continuous rather than an immediate turning point. There are a few reasons why a premature entry into fatherhood may not result into such a quick change. For younger males, raising their children is likely to hamper their attempts to stay in education or to find a legal employment. Also, taking up a father role may loom to adolescents as threatening to their autonomy and masculinity whereas for older men the opposite seems to be the case with fatherhood embodying generativity and masculinity (Marsiglio and Cohan, 1997).

In the light of the afore-presented research, it is likely that the fathers in this study may be (at least at the beginning) ambiguous about endorsing an adult role of a “responsible father” while still being very young themselves. Possibly, we will observe their desire of freedom and autonomy juxtaposing with their wish to be effective, affectionate parents; they may find themselves in a precarious position – between what they are used to and what is expected of them because of a new social role they have entered.

The next section concentrates on the concept of motherhood and how it has been explored in the research to date.
3.3.2 Motherhood

The approach towards pregnancy is usually analysed against the responses to retrospective questions on how a mother felt at the time of finding out about pregnancy and during its process. Women are asked whether at that particular moment in time the child was intended, unwanted or if pregnancy was mistimed (the child may have been wanted but a later stage). These two last response options are often clustered together. It has been demonstrated that when there is a negative response to questions, pregnancy is usually associated with negative child outcomes (Joyce, Kaestner, and Korenman, 2000).

Additionally, in studies looking at the parents themselves, the unwanted pregnancy has been related to a low sense of comfort (both psychological and physical), to the less positive approach towards parenting and the unsatisfying quality of the relationship with one’s romantic partner/ spouse (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2007; Logan, et al., 2007). As a consequence, it may be hypothesised that when the pregnancy is wanted, one should expect its greater pro-social effect on one’s involvement in offending. This hypothesis is made based on two arguments. First, if pregnancy has been planned, the likelihood of actively embracing a new life role (accompanied by a change in routine activities) increases. Second, prior research pointing to an array of negative ramifications of unintended births implies that the cumulative effect may diminish the pro-social character of this transition event.

A lot of teenage mothers give an overall positive account of their motherhood experience, embracing it as an opportunity to achieve personal satisfaction, as a driving force to carry on with schooling or with a job, or as a chance to soothe strained family relationships (Rolfe, 2008). However, the opposite scenario, where becoming a mother can bring about certain difficulties, which are not intrinsic to transitions emphasised by life-course researchers, is also possible. For instance, getting a job or being married are likely to enhance an individual’s human and social capital whereas the extra pressure on a parent (including for example the transformation of routine activities to manage child care) may trigger a lot of stress and eventually cancel out the success of the bond as a formative transition. Richie (2001) pointed out that mothers upon re-entry to mainstream society had to struggle against major obstacles many of which were related to not having enough resources, the factor likely to moderate the effect of parenthood on desistance. Nonetheless, Richie as well noted that the relationships of females with their children were more stable if the mothers could count on support (financial in the first place) in their parenting. Despite potential difficulties implied by becoming a mother at a young age,
many teenage mothers actually owe the transition into adult femininity to their experience of motherhood. As McDermott and Graham (2005) affirmed, “good mothering” serves as one of the keys to unlock this world of adult femininity. A number of teenage mothers find themselves involved in the so called “consoling plots” (Prettyman, 2005) or competitive parenting (Higginson, 1998), an associative process during which the identity of a “teen mother” is being replaced with that of a “good mother” and the latter should be invested in (McDermott and Graham, 2005). This process entails building up an image of a gradually more self-sufficient mother who is mature, responsible and capable of financially providing for her child/children (Higginson, 1998; Rolfe, 2008).

In opposition to widely reinforced stereotypes of gang girls depicted as either tomboys or sex-toys (Nurge, 2003), gaining a better understanding of their experiences at the time of pregnancy and following child birth may confront these ubiquitous portrayals. An in-depth analysis of this very special group of teenage mothers will demonstrate the extent to which transition into motherhood modifies their life course and, at the same time, will offer a chance to fathom how they negotiate between the two identities: of a mother and of a gang member. It is hypothesised throughout this thesis that becoming a mother does not inevitably lead to giving up a “bad girl” identity but that it requires at least working out the compromise between the two identities if a young woman wishes to be respected (Hunt, Joe-Laidler, and MacKenzie, 2005).

Despite the fact that research quite consistently demonstrates that adolescent motherhood is linked to giving up on education, the path to dropping out of school is not as straightforward as previously thought. Pregnancy may be the result of rather than a cause of leaving school early. Even more, motherhood may serve as a substantial motivator for a teenage girl to re-engage in school (Angwin and Kamp, 2007). A lot of early research was characterised with selection problems and did not manage to control for confounding factors; poor outcomes for both a mother and a child that are linked to teenage pregnancy are likely to stem from fundamental triggers of that pregnancy rather than follow a child birth itself. For instance, research has demonstrated that the underlying factor in establishing the effects of adolescent pregnancy and motherhood is not age but poverty which accompanied by social stigmatisation may negatively impact on the transition to early motherhood (Kirkman et al., 2001; Yardley, 2008). Several factors that increase the risk of unwanted pregnancy are quite wide spread among girls in gangs. For instance, being involved with substantially older men (six years or more) is linked to both young
mothers in and outside gangs (Dietrich, 1998). Also, the experience of family abuse (whether physical or sexual) is said to be related to roughly 50-75% of teenage pregnancies (Stevens-Simon and McAnarney, 1996) and it has been quite consistently noted as a common feature among female gang members (Fleisher and Klienart, 2004). Moreover, environmental effects are also seen to be connected with early pregnancy, especially in neighbourhoods where it is gradually more common and seen as socially acceptable (Anderson, 1999). This may particularly refer to impoverished communities where the “lack of opportunities for personal advancement may lead to a lack of motivation to avoid pregnancy,” and where “adolescent childbearing is considered normative” (Stevens-Simon and McAnarney, 1996, p.318).

Comparable social triggers of teenage pregnancy have been spotted in studies of girls in gangs (Miller, 2001). Nonetheless, these factors are not necessarily the only indicators of girls in gangs getting pregnant and how they later look after their children. What also needs to be taken into consideration are the perspectives of these girls themselves. Even though their decisions are influenced by structural limitations both at home and in their “street community”, by becoming mothers girls may be forced to recognise at least some aspects of conventional femininity (Joe-Laidler and Hunt, 2001). Additionally, a study of how teenage gang girls find their relationships with their boyfriends and families as soon as they become pregnant and when children are born is likely to shed light on their transforming notions of femininity (Moloney et al., 2011).

Starting with research by Graham and Bowling (1995), they observed that adolescent females’ desistance was affected to the biggest extent by the birth of a child. Females they interviewed spoke about a positive change in their lives referring to their identities, perceptions, behaviour and the sense of responsibility. Graham and Bowling’s study convincingly corroborated the hypothesis that becoming either a mother or a father (but a mother in particular) leads to changes in everyday routines. Parents recounted weaker relations with their offending peers and with places which had earlier “contributed” to an individual’s delinquent behaviour. Fleisher and Klienart (2004), in their study of 74 gang females, demonstrated that out of 41 of those who decided to leave the gang, 40 per cent pinpointed becoming pregnant as the key to their desistance. The transition from “street life” to “home life” came with establishing new social bonds with family members, friends and the community, all of which served as a shield against the gang past.
Moreover, Edin and Kefalas (2005) analysed the transformative potential of motherhood in low-income, single, urban women’s lives. The findings from in-depth interviews demonstrated that women’s perceptions of childbirth substantially differed by socio-economic class. Being limited with their chances to go further up in their social status, low-income young women made fulfilment of maternal responsibilities their principal aim ahead of education, securing a job and so on. It was documented that a robust association emerged between motherhood and desistance from crime. A number of females affirmed that becoming a mother had altered their everyday routines and had contributed to the decrease in criminal opportunities:

I used to be bad, go around breaking windows and stuff. Now I don’t do nothing. I be with her all day. I come to school, go home, be with her (p.180).

Yet other females maintained that being a mother had reinforced their chances of conformity by offering them an objective and instilling motivation to aim for something better for both them and their children. The testimonies of the interviewed females highlighted “motherhood’s transforming influence, leading [the women] to abandon their ‘drinking and drugging,’ to trade a wild life for one spent at home, to return to school, pursue employment, reconnect with family, and to find a new sense of hope and purpose” (Edin and Kefalas, 2005, p.184). In opposition to the common public preconception that premature pregnancy and childbirth disrupt school and economic competence of disadvantaged females, Edin and Kefalas implied that motherhood provided an opportunity of a positive change in these women’s lives by pulling them away from the street into traditional roles with extra meaning.

The findings of Edin and Kefalas’s (2005) study were further corroborated by the results of the study by Hunt et al. (2005). They looked at the drinking behaviours of 118 female gang members and discovered that both pregnancy and then motherhood influenced to a major extent their trajectories of alcohol use. Before they became pregnant, the majority of females had regularly consumed alcohol, most often at house parties and on different peers-related occasions. Nonetheless, at the time of pregnancy, roughly 85 per cent of them wholly refrained from drinking and consequently “the majority of their time was now spent at home, a dramatic switch from the hustle and excitement of street life” (p.358). Despite the fact that a number of these females recommenced drinking after the child was born, their alcohol consumption decreased noticeably and they used to drink by themselves to unwind rather than to drink out for fun.
Last but not least, Kreager, Matsueda and Erosheva (2010) looked at the sample of low-income adolescent females in Denver. They observed motherhood to act as a trigger of desistance from both offending and drug use. Finally, the study that merits special attention is the one by Moloney et al. (2011). The sample in that recent study comprised 65 gang-involved young mothers from an array of poverty stricken neighbourhoods in the San Francisco Bay Area. They were interviewed on their experiences of motherhood and child’s father involvement in child rearing. It turned out that in the majority of cases counting on children’s fathers was simply unfeasible. The major reasons for fathers’ absence were either unwillingness to provide child-care (emotional and financial) or, if they wanted to help, lacking the resources to look after children. When it comes to the experience of motherhood, most young mothers spoke about their struggle with balancing the two identities: “bad girl” and “good mother”. Twenty-nine per cent of teenage mothers were not able to break liaisons with the gang though they wished they could because of feeling obliged to stay at home. They depicted a fairly split identity – at times emphasising their identity of a responsible mother and on another occasions emphasising their “bad girl” identity i.e. being out there with fellow gang members and engaging in gang activities while their relative (mother or grandmother most of the time) looked after the child. Frosty (aged 17), one of the interviewed girls, affirmed:

As long as I don’t have my baby with me, I’m down [will join in a fight].
If I got my baby with me, I’m a punk [won’t join in a fight]. Cuz I’m not gonna do nothing violent with my kid with me (p.12).

These mothers also used to carry on with their drug-related behaviours, notably drugs sale, in order to subsidise their incomes. Many of them rationalised that behaviour as a vital income-providing opportunity in a highly competitive market and devotion to always provide for their children even by very risky means. They wished their children had a decent standard of living. Being an unsuccessful mother was very likely to be a worse lapse in femininity than being in a gang and potentially committing criminal acts. Females’ accounts of their lives and delinquency generally portray their involvement in crime as usually taking place in situations of limited resources and restricted opportunities, rather than it being a source of gratification (Naffine, 1997). With time, the majority of the interviewed girls in Moloney et al.’s study eventually either dropped out of the gang or at least their involvement subsided. In that group, children served as the primary trigger for that change. Some mothers claimed that they desired to cut down on the number of nights out because of their strong motivation to be a parent their children could look up to. They perceived early motherhood to be a positive transformative experience allowing them to
re-evaluate their membership in the gang. Graciela (aged 19) portrayed her transformation in the following way:

> It kind of made me grow up faster than I should have because now it’s like I think about my baby first before I think about myself… Before, I don’t care about nothing and, you know, I’m goin to do what I want to do. And then when I had my baby, I thought of him first and I changed my way of thinking (p.11).

Much of the behaviour was modified because girls did not want to expose their children to gang everyday routine, especially to drug and alcohol use; they also mentioned being cautious about gang-related violence, now that they had children to look after. In these cases, being a mother provided an opportunity to substantially change the priorities and the amount of time spent on gang-related risky behaviour. Gang girls were working out the “good mother” identity by moving away from those who kept hanging out and did so carrying their children around. As “Giggles” (aged 16) described:

> There are so many other girls that I know with kids and they’re still out there banging with their kids two, three in the morning. So many things have happened to babies because their moms are stupid, taking them out to parties, parks, while they’re drunk, drinking in front of them, smoking in front of them. That’s something I wouldn’t do (p.8).

By emphasising the nature of behaviour of “bad mothers”, these self-assessed “good mothers” propped up their assertion of good motherhood. Nonetheless, their efforts to establish themselves as “good mothers” were challenged on numerous occasions.

One of the areas where challenges were likely to arise was the relationship between the new mother and her own mother or grandmother who, as it happens quite often, are main providers both in terms of money and childcare support for the babies. And this support is especially vital for the young mothers who aim to get back on track with their school or to get a job. For girls who became gang members because they had longed for greater independence and had wanted to run away from problematic issues at home, becoming a mother meant they were forced to rely on support from others. In Moloney et al.’s (2011) study, it was interesting to see that 41% of girls lived with their baby/ babies at the mother’s house, but only 12% went to live with both parents and most of them were grateful and appreciative of the support they were receiving in raising up their children. Becoming a mother tends to bring girls closer to their own mothers with whom they often had had tense relationship at the time of greater involvement with a gang. It must be noted though that this support is not without its own dilemmas.
Bearing in mind the problematic history of very many gang girls’ family life (Hunt et al., 2000), these young people often end up stuck in gang life seeing a gang as an alternative family belonging to which makes them feel detached from family problems (alcohol, drugs, sexual abuse) and parental supervision. As a consequence, getting back to the family and reliance on its support is likely to result into a new array of problems. As McRobbie (2000, p. 167) pinpointed, “it is not hard to see the more negative dimensions of the ‘advantages’ of a supportive family... dependency on the parents puts the young mothers in a powerless position”. While the problem had earlier been them being “bad girls”, now the problem was for these girls to be ever perceived as “good mothers” i.e. can they properly look after their children? Don’t they spend too much time out, hanging around? One of the girls in Moloney’s study said the following with regard to her mother:

Tell[s] me how to raise my son, or if I wanna go out: ‘No, you’re not bringin the baby with you, it’s too cold outside,’ She doesn’t trust me with him so she takes him from me. And if I leave him, usually she’ll say she’ll call the police cuz I’m abandoning him or whatever. It’s too much (p. 9).

Nonetheless, grandmothers were also frequently very critical of their granddaughters’ mothering skills, which is well exemplified in the words of another participant of the same study:

I don’t get along with my grandma ‘cuz she makes me feel like a bad mother. She’s like, “I know Teon better than you. Why are you making Teon suffer?” (p.9)

Young mothers struggled to accept these criticisms especially because in the eyes of many of them their own mothers had failed, let them down so not being proverbial “good mothers” themselves they should not be now criticising their daughters (Hunt et al., 2000). Girls’ new “mother identities” and the strong wish to fulfil their responsibilities as mothers to the best of their ability gradually replaced their identities of gang girls. It should be very much highlighted however that the decision to leave a gang was not of a kind “I am living. This life chapter is now closed” but it posed major challenges. Some of the interviewed mothers were challenged by rival gangs, which did not know that they had exited the gang. Others spoke about having been resented by their own gang because of their exit. Nonetheless, a lot of girls stated that gang exit due to being a mother was an acceptable way of leaving the gang life behind, the way that did not imply being “beaten out of the gang”. Notwithstanding, establishing the identity of a “good mother” in place of the one of a “gang girl” turns out to be a very tricky mission to accomplish.
3.4 Summary

If we summarise these key findings, we can infer that parenthood, at least for some, may serve as a trigger engaging parents in meaning-making of the past behaviours and potentially, as a consequence, leading them to reform their social identities (Edin et al., 2004; Sampson and Laub, 2003). Whilst young people rework their past experiences from a point of view of parents, the emphasis drifts away from an accurate, backward-looking verification of events that had occurred in their life towards the search of meaning that one attributes to these experiences. Such a narrative is therefore not a mere sequential record of events but incorporates motivations, feelings and goals (Maruna, 2001; Stueve and Pleck, 2003). For adults with an array of past failures to triumph over, emotions and feelings play an essential role in both the enhancement of appraisal of “wantedness” to change and in related behavioural decisions (Giordano et al., 2007; Santelli et al., 2003). Past, present and anticipated future need to be successfully interwoven in the narrative and as such they may provide a direction for future behaviour because people do behave in ways, which are compatible with the stories they have built about themselves (Maruna, 2001). However, for a new identity to be formed, one must realise a need of personal change and it has to be admitted that for young gang members to develop this need in the first place is often a very slow process.

The following Chapter will present the methodology that was applied in this study.
Chapter Four: Methodology

There are a lot of myths revolving around gang membership and gang desistance, and the perception that “once in a gang, always in a gang” (sticky labels) also seems to be quite prevalent. I intended to give the voice to the group of people who had successfully disengaged from a gang to show that the experience of parenthood may serve as an effective trigger of identity and behavioural changes. Drawing on participants’ accounts of lived experiences, I was also able to devise an array of recommendations for practitioners working with young people in gangs; on how to best utilise the potential that becoming a parent affords.

The research question that this study addressed was:

*How did the experience of becoming parents lead a sample of inner-London and gang-involved young adults to wish to disengage from a gang and what social and cognitive processes defined disengagement?*

To address it, the qualitative tool (i.e. narrative interviews) was applied. Interviews had a story-telling format in order for them to be centred on young parents themselves. I accessed the participants via gatekeepers in the organisations supporting gang-involved youth. An array of gatekeepers was contacted as a result of my thorough Internet search, none of the contacts had been previously known to me. I sought to speak to both fathers and mothers aged 18 and above who had become parents at some point during their time in a gang. I collected the data from 15 individuals aged between 19 and 37 (8 males and 7 females). Both mothers and fathers were on average 19 years old at the time of becoming parents for the first time.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the collected data. This analytic tool above all serves to deliver a detailed portrayal of the data set, allows us to observe similarities and differences amongst the participants and, finally, its end product is useful at informing policy development.

4.1 Data and Sample

4.1.1 Sampling method

The study employed a non-probability sampling strategy, namely purposive sampling. The choice of this strategy was determined by its adequacy when a researcher’s aim is to
elucidate some discrete phenomena or to investigate a few selected cases. Also, it is useful when a targeted sample needs to be accessed quickly and when it is not of prime importance to sample for proportionality. The risk associated with this strategy is that certain participants are more readily accessible than others and therefore may be over-represented in the research sample (Gu, Hu, and Liu, 2001). Nonetheless, it appears that in the case of this study the benefits of employing this kind of sampling strategy outweighed its disadvantages, as the research sample – young parents with history of gang membership – was highly specific, not easily accessible and the time spent conducting the fieldwork had to be relatively short.

4.1.2 Inclusion criteria for the sample

The data were collected from 15 self-nominated former gang members living in 4 different London boroughs (Croydon, Wandsworth, Peckham and Lewisham). The operational definition of a “gang” used in this study was the one by the Eurogang network, which sees a gang as any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of their group identity. However, to make it more stringent and following in the footsteps of other researchers whose gang studies have been based in the UK and including Densley (2013), Grund and Densley (2012), and Sharp et al. (2006), I have added one additional criterion, that is, a “gang” had to have at least one structural feature (name/ area etc.)

The inclusion criteria were pointed out to the gatekeepers in the initial correspondence and as they facilitated the recruitment of participants and arranged for the researcher to meet with them, it was expected that I would have encountered only those who would have been in the gang understood along the said terms. For the sake of full confirmation, I asked however each participant the following question: “Do you consider your group of friends to be a gang?” This question is in concordance with Junger-Tas et al.’s (2010) research on self-reported delinquency. Participants needed to recognise themselves as being part of the group that was involved in illegal activities and had taken up a name and acquired distinct symbols of membership (e.g. colour).

Apart from self-nominating as former gang members, participants had to have become parents at one point during their time in a gang. The inclusion of men in the parenthood study appeared to be vital in the light of research advocating for the, on average, positive
impact of fatherhood on fathers’ life-course (Marsiglio and Hutchinson, 2002; Pruett, 2000). Specifically, in relation to motherhood, in order to meaningfully evaluate the impact of motherhood on female gang behaviour, it was vital to discern the time of motherhood from the pregnancy period. I expected active participation in the gang to diminish during pregnancy as a result of the physical constraints implied by being pregnant and the perception of clearly negative outcomes of being in a gang on health and well being of a mother-to-be. Using just one term i.e. “motherhood” at any stage of the process, whether during interviewing or later in the analysis of the results, might have possibly led to the overstatement in describing the moderating impact of becoming a mother on gang membership.

Theoretically, the risk inscribed in the method of self-report is inclusion in a sample of people that use the term “gang” in a way that does not match the definition, which I employ and/ or exclusion of those who should be considered as such according to my criteria. Additionally, it is not easy to authenticate the claims – whether those who say that they exited a gang had really done so (Gadd and Farrall, 2004). Practically however, self-report has been a widely employed tool in gang research to date proving to be a robust measure of gang membership and possessing test-retest reliability (Esbensen et al., 2001; Webb, Katz, and Decker, 2006).

4.1.3 Recruitment of participants

Regardless of the fact that the estimates of the real number of gangs and the “gang” definition are widely disputed, both research as well as media accounts advocate that there is a lot of apprehension revolving around gangs in London, UK (Densley, 2013). In 2009, the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee stated that a “proportionally higher number of gangs” with each having “a greater sense of territorialism” had reinvented prevailing territorial conflicts in a “sheer number of postcode areas” in London (Knife Crime Report, 2009). Since then, the rise of gang-related violence has been regarded as a threat to London; reflecting complex processes of multiple social marginality (Pitts, 2008).

The recruitment of participants was highly challenging. First, I carried out an extensive Internet search for London-based organisations/ support groups for gang-involved youth. Once having all organisations providing support to gang-involved youth listed, an initial e-mail was sent to organisations’ chief executives/ managers or individuals directly in charge
of projects if their names were indicated on a website. Regardless of whether an email was followed by a response or not, I personally called each of the addresses. Crowhurst and Kennedy-Macfoy (2013) highlighted that committed workers play an essential role as gatekeepers and it is therefore vital to establish positive contact with them at the very beginning of the research. Out of 35 organisations that I contacted via an email and then followed with a phone conversation, only four eventually provided me with effective support. Some initially expressed willingness to help but ended up changing their course and finally went quiet. Those who refused immediately most often gave the following excuses: too small a number of staff to accommodate the research plea, being overwhelmed with work, but most often a very reserved and suspicious attitude towards researchers in general and a strong preconception that researchers arrive, conduct their research and then disappear and there is no immediate benefit to the organisation. To those gatekeepers who were positive, the study was presented in detail and the gatekeeper acted as a facilitator in the recruitment of participants. He/ she outlined the nature of the study and what it entailed to any male or female meeting the inclusion criteria. The act of the gatekeeper approaching the potential participant does not signal to others that that person has a previously unknown characteristic (hereby, being a gang member) because I specifically targeted right from the beginning these projects which are directed at gang-involved youth. Their participation or otherwise would not affect the services and support, which these young people receive. If positive, the gatekeeper would arrange a time for the researcher to meet with a young person for a face-to-face interview.

Gatekeepers facilitated the recruitment of thirteen participants (8 males and 5 females). In one of the organisations I had contacted, the gatekeeper informed me that he would not facilitate my access to the young people he was currently supporting but he mentioned one male who had used the organisation’s services several years back but kept in touch with them. He sought his permission so I could contact him and then provided me with his contact details. I addressed him directly; during the initial phone conversation, I presented my research and asked relevant questions founded in the earlier-provided Eurogang definition of a “gang”. He opted for a telephone interview rather than a face-to-face interview, which I accepted and this was arranged for the next day. I managed to find the remaining two participants (2 females) somehow by coincidence. With regard to the first of them, I came across an online article telling her story in one of the national newspapers. She is an ex-gang member and a current charity worker, and as a charity name was mentioned in the article, I was able to contact her directly. Before I gave her an initial call,
I had already been able to check her story against my inclusion criteria; we had a telephone interview. Finally, I saw the second female in a television programme on girls in gangs. I was successful at finding her account on one of social networking sites, contacted her directly and received a positive response followed by arranging a face-to-face interview to be held in London.

Each young parent who I met in person (13 interviewees) was compensated with £25 for his/her time and effort. Jacques and Wright (2008) suggested that in fieldwork involving significant participant effort (e.g. an hour interview), a reward carries an important symbolic message: participants may not be in favour of “doing something for nothing”.

4.1.4 Demographics

For each participant, I noted down the individual-level characteristics (i.e. age, sex and ethnicity) and dynamic contextual factors (i.e. the number of children, relationship status and employment status at the time of the interview).

There was roughly an equal split when it comes to participants’ sex: 8 males and 7 females participated in the study. Male participants were on average 23 years old (ranging from 19 to 27) at the time of the interview whereas females were on average 27 years old (ranging from 20 to 37). Both mothers and fathers were on average 19 years old when becoming parents for the first time (pregnancies ended with miscarriage were excluded). Ten participants (6 females and 4 males) had one child each, four participants (1 female and 3 males) had two children each and one participant (male) had 3 children. Very young (i.e. aged under 16) mothers and, to even greater extent, fathers, are an infrequent phenomenon and were excluded from the sample. Another reason for not including parents aged 16 or younger in the study was that this would have entailed having to obtain a further consent from young parents’ own parents.

With regard to ethnicity, I expected that a substantial commonality would be noticed in narratives for young females/males representing very different cultural backgrounds. They may be brought up in environments, which differ one from another quite noticeably in terms of cultural and familial traditions, but, at the same time, the substantial number of them deals with similar challenges when attempting to manage a mother/father and a gang

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5 Neither the name of the television programme nor the name of the social networking site will be disclosed here for reasons of confidentiality.
identity. The sample was ethnically varied. Four participants declared to be White British, three were African British, four were Caribbean British, three were Asian British (White British + Pakistani) and one participant was Black British.

Table 1 below illustrates the variety in relationship patterns as noted for participants. Seven fathers were neither married nor co-residing with mothers of their children; they did not live in households with their children at the time of the interview either. Only one father reported living together with his partner of 4 years who was due to give birth a week after our interview. In the past, six males had tried but failed to live as a family with their children and children’s mothers. One never attempted to do so because the relationship had broken down before pregnancy was discovered. With regard to mothers, all of them lived with their children. Three of them were single and kept as little contact with the father of a child as possible. Other three women were in long-term on-off relationships with fathers of their children but these men were incarcerated at the time of the interview. Last but not least, one woman was in an on-off relationship with a father of her second child but not at all in contact with a father of her elder child.

As far as the employment status is concerned, one-third of participants (3 females and 2 males) were not employed at the time of the interview but lived off state benefits. Amongst them, some appeared to accept the status quo and were not seeking employment and some gave up on doing so after multiple unsuccessful attempts. The other five participants were part-time youth workers engaged in projects supporting either youth involved in gangs or socially disadvantaged young parents. They believed they were in the best position to do so because “they had been there too.” Finally, the remaining five participants all had different occupations (motivational speaker, charity owner, football coach, university student and a secure unit worker).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship pattern</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lives in with a partner</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In an on-and-off relationship with an imprisoned other parent</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In an on-and-off relationship with a non-imprisoned other parent</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Participants’ relationship status.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Living off state benefits</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time youth worker</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>5^6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivational speaker and campaigner on projects for youth at risk of joining/involved in gangs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth engagement practitioner (own charity)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time football coach</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University student</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secure unit for young people</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Participants’ employment status.

4.2 **Rationale for applying qualitative interviews as a tool**

Interviews provide in-depth information about different life experiences of participants, notably in the domains, which have never been the focal point in researchers’ attention (McNamara, 1999). I collected the data on the subjective experiences of those who, when in a gang, learnt that they would become parents. One of the main advantages of this method is that interviews (with the emphasis on face-to-face interviews) are a far more personal form of research than other methods such as questionnaires, surveys and experiments, and they also construct rich and complex data, which is almost impossible to access by these other methods. Moreover, if I had applied quantitative methods, this would have signalled that I anticipated measuring pertinent variables and had a testable hypothesis, and I can claim neither of these. Motives of disengagement from social groups can be very complex and there is a certain dose of uncertainty around them, which in turn makes the use of qualitative methods a more informed choice (Holstein, 2011). As Patton (2002, p.55-6) pointed out: “Qualitative inquiry is particularly oriented towards exploration, discovery, and inductive logic. [...] Categories or dimensions of analysis emerge from open-ended observations as the inquirer comes to understand patterns that exist in the phenomenon being investigated.” I have contended on multiple occasions throughout the literature review that there is not enough knowledge on gang disengagement as a distinctive social process and whether this process displays gender differences so this study is by and large exploratory and for such a study qualitative methods are best suited (Krauss, 2000).

^6 There were two males who had two part-time jobs: both were youth workers and, additionally, one worked as a sales assistant and the other as a gardener.
Interviews also turn out to be especially convenient when running research with socially excluded groups as this method is considered to be linked with the endorsement of trust with participants and the further implication that participants’ views are treated as important (Umana-Taylor and Bamaca, 2004). The researcher also has a chance to probe or pose follow-up questions. Last but not least, interviews are preferred over self-completion questionnaires among participants who suffer from limited literacy. On the other hand, they are time-consuming and resource-intensive. Also, the quality of the interview data substantially relies on researcher’s skills and on how much a participant is willing to reveal himself/herself (Kvale, 1996). In the context of the current study, the advantages of this method seem to however overcome its potential drawbacks.

4.2.1 Narrative interviews

All interviews with young parents were narrative in form because this type of interviewing is an efficient tool to give an insight into the ways an individual constructs his/her self-schemas (Maruna, 2001) and how they impact on an individual’s intentions and motives of behaviour (Ward and Maruna, 2007). Consequently, this may provide us with an important knowledge of both phenomenological causes of one’s actions as well as how these actions are shaped by the wider social milieu (Larsson and Sjöblom, 2010) including internalised values and principles (Gadd and Farrall, 2004). Our self-schema can change and these transformations constitute a process in which new output about one’s self is incorporated into the previously present self-schema. This process is on-going with the time needed for these changes to take place (Howard and Renfrow, 2003; Maruna, 2001) and I argue that the turning point, which the individuals experience, is in fact the peak point of this self-schema change. Moreover, I believe that themes persistently coming up in the narratives correspond to more notable and thus significant facets of participants’ self-schemas (Owens, 2003) meaning that the more participants emphasise particular themes, the more important they are when constructing self-schemas. Last but not least, I was looking at participants’ life as parents as a whole in order to be able to see better the process of transformation. The use of narrative interviews has therefore certain and noticeable benefits as compared to other methods which attempt to grasp the individual’s life-history such as semi-structured interviews that are linked to a number of disadvantages, one of which are memory biases (Sampson and Laub, 2003; Passer and Smith, 2007; Piquero et. al., 2007). Nonetheless, memory biases do not come up as a problem in narrative interviews as these are not the stories as such nor the facts participants put across that are
of interest, but instead how they are told i.e. the individual’s view of reality (Maruna and Matravers, 2007) and how he/she sees the life and constructs self-schema.

During the interviews, I embraced a style grounded in the belief that as an interviewer I should be a good listener while the participants became the storytellers. This seems to be a sensible approach as it gave the participants the chance to talk about their own life-stories and to make the links between the events in a way that made most sense to them (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). One must bear in mind though that as participants select events from their past, put them in temporal order, create links between them and make sense of them, they form a story and this story is not a mirror of the past but is shaped by the context of the interview (Lucius-Hoene, 2000). Additionally, all narratives entail an explanatory factor, that is, the stories are constructed in relation to my research questions as well as participants’ perceptions of my expectations (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000) and they are also addressed at the listener either present i.e. myself or imaginary i.e. the reader of this study (Lucius-Hoene, 2000). “Tell me your story” is a reciprocal process, that is, it is never unidirectional – from an interviewee to the researcher, but operates in both directions. Holstein and Gubrium (2004) strongly highlighted that the interview process is always active; whatever an interviewee shares is not considered as an account of the reality taken straight from a static reservoir. The interviewer plays an effective role in an interviewee’s recall of memory – interviewees put together pieces of first-hand experience in cooperation with the interviewer. Uncovering some unquestionable truths is not the purpose, what is more important is identifying and portraying the real experiences and viewpoints of this very specific group of young parents at the given time. It cannot be guaranteed that future research will replicate or provide similar findings to the ones obtained in this study but the current study responds to this standard by presenting a thorough and comprehensive account of the used methodology and theoretical framework (Golafshani, 2003; Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Making use of qualitative, narrative data, the study has uncovered what parenting signifies for study participants, referring directly to their words whenever this was possible. Accounts of personal experiences and of difficulties participants were facing are likely to provide new angles to the discussion of the challenges of parenthood among adolescents who through embeddedness in the gang have very often found themselves to be on the margins of society.
4.2.2 Developing a plan for interviews

While working on the literature review, I had made systematic notes of gaps in the research to date, of contradictory findings and of issues, which needed further attention. These preliminary inquiries informed the set of several key issues that would have especially focused my attention throughout the interviews. I would have noted the overlapping and discrepant issues, as they were coming up in the interview, to be able to ask further questions once the interviewee had finished his/her main narrative.

At the onset of each interview, my first goal was to create a comfortable and relaxed atmosphere by asking some icebreaker questions, and I found that expressing appreciation of participants’ help definitely facilitated a good rapport. Then, I explained the context of my research to the interviewee and presented the central topic (that is, the experience of parenthood in the context of a gang) so the interviewee could start generating his/her personal story. Then, each participant spoke freely about how they embraced parenthood and what effect it had on their links with a gang. Once the narrative account had started, I let it flow undisturbed; only, when parents stopped unexpectedly, I would encourage them to continue by saying: “tell me what happened next.” I listened attentively and did not ask any questions until the interviewee decided to pause in a way that implied that the story was finished.

Following the natural end to their self-generated story, I referred back to parents’ narratives using them as prompts for further questioning to fill the gaps (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000). To avoid imposing any expectations on interviewees’ responses, questions I asked were open-ended and non-directive. I also avoided asking “why” questions, asked follow-up questions using participants’ own words (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000) and monitored what had been said in the narrative sequence. By utilising paraphrasing and summarisation for clarification, I was ensuring my thorough and complete understanding of the phenomenon in question.

Importantly, my interview questions did not intend to convey any moral judgements of participants’ past behaviours nor did they blame them for any wrongdoings. Last but not least, participants were asked an open-ended question pertaining to the potential link between the birth of a child and behavioural, and identity transformations: “Where do you think you would have been now if it had not been for your child/children?”
4.3 Ethical concerns

The University of Manchester Research Ethics Committee did grant its consent for the study to be run after having reviewed the study procedures.

4.3.1 Participants’ wellbeing

Before each interview started, every participant was handed in a Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix A) and then was asked to sign a Consent Form (see Appendix B). Participants had the opportunity to ask any questions related to their participation and the future use of collected data. The sheet informed them about, above all, how I would handle the data (confidentiality and anonymity), who would have access to it, that their participation was completely voluntary and so on. This form also included the contact e-mail address of myself and my supervisors for the future reference: in case any doubts or questions arose for participants in relation to their participation in the study, which they would have liked to talk about. During each interview, I strived to establish a “balanced rapport” with each participant: to be approachable and friendly on the one hand, but commanding and neutral on the other (Fontana and Prokos, 2007). Last but not least, I made sure that, if I had several interviews scheduled to follow one after another, I would have fitted some spare time in between them so that participants had the chance to discuss their concerns with me if they had any. None of the participants did report any troubling issues after the interview.

4.3.2 Anonymity and confidentiality

I anticipated that participants might have been concerned about what information I might disclose to any third person about their involvement in illicit activities if they had been involved in such. As predicted, the majority of participants explicitly made sure that I would keep what they had shared with me anonymous and confidential. It is essential for the researcher to act in accordance with this principle as protecting participants from the risks of potential harm and embarrassment are at stake here. Additionally, by ensuring complete confidentiality and anonymity of collected data, an interviewee feels more at ease and is likely to open up more whilst sharing information in relation to his/ her personal life experiences (Baez, 2002).
This study was conducted with a vulnerable group and in the area of illegal activities or, more precisely, where the issues related to past as well as (potentially) future involvement in illegal activities are likely to be disclosed by the participants. If the participant speaks in detail about committing crime in the future (especially one that results in harm to others), the researcher has a duly obligation to report that. However, at the same time, such disclosure, apart from breaching confidentiality, would mean that, in practice, researchers would not be able to conduct studies delving one way or the other into illegal activities. This study explores disengagement from gangs so I could not take the active strategy to avoid such information being disclosed; However, I asked participants not to discuss their potential plans of future offending in specific detail as then I would have been compelled to decide whether or not that needed reporting (Wiles et al., 2006).

4.3.2.1 Data security

Aldridge, Medina and Ralphs (2010), using the first-hand experience from their youth gang research study, outlined the recommendations on how to assure that digital qualitative data are stored securely. I kept them in mind when handling my fieldwork data. They referred to: good practice of storing and deleting data, data anonymisation, sharing data with others and so on. I conducted all interviews using my personal Dictaphone and after having completed each interview, transferred the file directly into my password-protected computer and deleted the said file from the Dictaphone. I anonymised interviewees’ accounts right at the time of collection – real names were replaced with pseudonyms. I stored audio files and interview transcripts only in two copies, that is, in an encrypted folder on my personal, password-protected computer and, as a backup, on my university network drive. I reduced the number of copies to two as data proliferation creates more opportunities for data insecurity, that is, security of data is more easily compromised (see the “principle of proliferation” in Aldridge, 2010, p.5) Never did I give anyone else access to audio files and I destroyed them after having completed the transcription of all interviews. To read the transcripts, I had printed them out but I destroyed those paper copies immediately after use. Their digital version will be however stored indefinitely and may be accessed by myself and my thesis supervisors.

The disclosure of the name of the research city was justified by the fact that it would help policy makers and community leaders be better informed about what happens in their city and what issues need to be addressed.
4.3.3 Right of withdrawal from the study

There is some risk that talking about the gang past may potentially generate unhappy memories and unpleasant emotions. Also, being interviewed on sensitive topics, and gang membership and putting parenthood in its context belong to these, may make the participants see the whole research process as more stressful than they had initially expected it to be. Every effort was made for participants not to feel compelled to further participate in the research if that was to be detrimental to their wellbeing. They had a right to refuse to answer any of the questions as well as to withdraw at any point from the study (Noaks and Wincup, 2004) without presenting a reason for that decision. Also, a participant’s decision to withdraw from the study would have not been passed onto the gatekeeper. Participants had the opportunity to ask me for details of therapeutic services if they felt any distress or anxiety because of the details they had revealed earlier and how these details might have been later used (I had the contact details of these available at hand). It was also made explicit until which point participants might retrospectively demand a withdrawal of any consent they had granted and/or insist on destroying the data (recordings, field notes) they had provided. It was clearly highlighted to each participant that this request was not without its limits: i.e. for instance, it could not be put once the research account had been finished (Connolly, 2003).

4.3.4 Fair treatment

Additionally, what must be noted is that, in broad terms, gang research carries a risk of labelling and stereotyping ethnic minorities and young people more generally. Both media and police accounts (Marshall, Webb, and Tilley, 2005) of British gangs have used to accentuate the ethnic context of gangs. This is a substantial oversimplification of the problem, which potentially results into further stigmatization of ethnic minorities. It is the case that gangs often tend to develop in areas inhabited by ethnic minorities and immigrants but targeting, uniquely or mainly, ethnic minority gangs may build up the public approach that gangs deserve a label of an “ethnic minority problem” (Martinez and Lee, 2000). Similarly to Aldridge et al. (2008), I was adamant about not falling into that trap of directing my attention solely in the direction of ethnic minority gangs and particularly focusing on certain parts of London already frequently labelled as “gang

7 None of the parents withdrew from the study; neither did any of them report any feelings of distress.
zones”. In the process of contacting organisations supporting gang-involved youth, I did not therefore focus on one specific area of London and as their gatekeepers facilitated recruitment of participants with history of gang membership, I did not have any influence on the ethnic breakdown of the research sample.

4.4 Fieldwork

I ran the interviews over a five-month period between July 2013 and November 2013. Twelve interviews took place at the youth organisations’ premises. I also ran two interviews over the phone: with Aaron who was a part-time youth mentor and Noreen who ran her own charity supporting youth at risk of joining/involved in gangs. Finally, one interview took place in a coffee shop (with Jasmine who was a campaigner and a freelance motivational speaker, and was no longer attached to any particular organisation).

Each interview took as much time as much information the interviewee was willing to share with me: the shortest interview was 40 minutes long and the longest was 1 hour and 20 minutes long. The interviews were recorded on a digital Dictaphone but I was prepared to take field notes in case of malfunctioning of the Dictaphone or if the participant did not like to be recorded. Audio-recorded data do not rely on the researcher’s quality of recall or selective attention, which augments reliability of data collection.

I collected data until I felt I had reached thematic saturation, which signifies that no additional themes are likely to emerge by doing further interviews (O’Reilly and Parker, 2013). This occurred after fifteen interviews with young parents. Finally, I personally transcribed them all, producing intelligible verbatim transcriptions (with slang). I left out “erms”, “ers”, “hmms” and repetitions but kept slang words like “gonna” and “wanna”. I have not lost any relevant information on the way and such produced transcripts read sensibly for thematic analysis.

Most parents had found their way into the programmes through self-referrals. This is crucial as it pertains to the earlier-discussed vital role of individual motivation in transition out of gangs or in desistance in general (Cassell and Weinrath, 2012; Rumgay, 2004) and that motivation levels are positively correlated with positive changes. High counts of self-referrals illustrated that there were many young people who realised that they required support and wished to receive it, and were pro-active about finding it.
4.4.1 Pen-portraits of participating fathers

Karim – 23, Asian British; homeless. Karim joined a gang aged around 11 but had been around “guns, drugs and violence” since much earlier. He never saw a gang as a gang; this was a family unit. His son was due exactly a week after our interview. He was no longer in a relationship with his son’s mother because he was verbally and physically abusive. His son was going to live with his mother but Karim intended to give him “all his time.” He saw himself as a reformed gang member but the narrative suggested otherwise. He was unemployed and living off benefits.

George – 19, White British, lived with his mother. He was 14 when joining a gang to seek protection from troubles and beating he had been the victim of on the estate where he had lived – “If you can’t beat them, join them.” He had three children aged 3, 2 and 1 by three different women. He was not in a relationship with any of his children’s mothers. His children lived with their mothers but he saw them every week and had them over every other weekend. He had disengaged from a gang before his third son was born. At the time of the interview, he had two part-time jobs: as a youth mentor and as a sales assistant.

Jason – 24, Caribbean British, lived by himself in a council flat. Jason was 13 when he joined a gang to get the sense of belonging to a family. He had a son aged 5 and a daughter aged 2, both with the same woman with whom he was in an on-off relationship. His children lived with their mother but he saw them “whenever he wanted to, all the time.” He started to disengage from a gang when his partner was pregnant with their first child. He did not get back into education because of severe learning difficulties and was unemployed, living off benefits.

Tyrelle – 27, Asian British, lived together with his partner of 4 years. He was 12 when he joined a gang to release his anger and to build an image of power and fear around himself (he had been bullied at school). At the time of the interview, Tyrelle’s partner was 8 months pregnant with their first child, a daughter. He started to disengage from a gang when he met his partner. He was a behavioural consultant for one of London charities working with gang-involved young people.

Sheldon – 23, Caribbean British, lived by himself in a council flat. He started committing crime at the age of 8 and joined a gang “for money” aged around 11. He had a daughter aged 5 with his former partner and at the time of the interview he was awaiting the birth of his second daughter with a different woman whom he was not in a relationship with either. Sheldon’s older daughter lived with her mother and he saw her on the weekends. He was in prison for the first three years of his older
daughter’s life and started to disengage after his release in March 2012. He was a part-time youth worker.

Aaron – 24, Asian British, lived by himself. He joined a gang aged 15 believing that it was the best way for him to release anger and frustration with his life at home. Aaron had a 6-year-old son with a former partner who he tried to see as often as possible and had him over every other weekend. He was not in any romantic relationship. He started to disengage after he became a Christian in 2010 (his son was 2 then). He worked full-time in a secure unit.

Trevor – 22, Black British, lived by himself. He was 11 when he joined a gang for reasons similar to Jason’s and Karim’s i.e. to get appreciation and sense of belonging to a family. He had a daughter aged 5 and a son aged 3, both with the same former partner. His children lived with their mother but he saw them 3-4 times a week and spent with them every other weekend. He started to disengage just after his son was born. He got back into education and, at the time of our interview, volunteered for a Young Dads group and worked part-time as a youth worker.

Jake – 25, White British, lived by himself. He joined a gang at the age of 12 following in his childhood friends’ footsteps. He had a 4-year-old daughter who lived with her mother in Wales. He used to see her once a month and during every school holidays. He started to disengage once he learnt that his then-partner was pregnant. He volunteered as an outreach worker for the police in the neighbourhood where he had grown up and also worked part-time as a gardener.

4.4.2 Pen-portraits of participating mothers

Noreen – 37, Caribbean British, lived with her daughter. She joined a gang at the age of 13 to “get acceptance, love, attention and understanding.” She had been in a vulnerable relationship with her daughter’s father and gave birth the day before her 16th birthday (did not hear from him for the next 15 years after getting pregnant). She did not start to change until after she turned 20 – this is when she was released from prison after three years and six months (sentenced for robbery) and fought successfully to get her daughter back. She got back into education and considered herself to be a successful “youth engagement practitioner.”

Desiree – 23, White British, lived with her 6-year-old son. She was 12 when joining a gang to seek protection, the sense of comfort and feeling enticed by looking at things her friends used to buy for themselves from drug money. She was not in a relationship
with her son’s father, had tried to build it for the sake of their son but it proved impossible – she had experienced two years of physical and verbal abuse. However, she ensured that he had a bond with his son. She started to disengage from a gang right after learning she was pregnant. She got back into education and was a University student.

Jessica – 27, White British, lived with her 4-year-old daughter. She joined a gang at the age of 14 “because of the easy money and this feeling of power and the reputation you can get.” She was in an on-off relationship with her partner for 10 years, he was in prison when I interviewed Jessica, but she visited him on a fairly regular basis. When she was 19, she had a miscarriage but it was not until she gave birth to her daughter four years later, when she decided to change. She was doing an on-off voluntary work since then but did not have a stable employment and lived off benefits.

Sheila – 25, African British, had a 6-year-old daughter. She was 14 when joining a gang for money and a sense of companionship. Like Jessica, she was in an on-off relationship with her partner for the last 10 years. He was also in prison then but Sheila never used to visit him (her daughter did however). Like Desiree, she started to disengage right after learning she was pregnant. She worked part-time as a girls’ football coach.

Trish – 20, African British, had a 3-year-old son. She joined a gang at the age of 13 lured by her older brother’s stories of “quick, easy money” and due to a toxic relationship with her birth mother. She was not on speaking terms with her son’s father at that time but said he was there for his son. Learning she was pregnant (already in 8th month), she just disappeared from the street (made easier by her brother who was a “senior” gang member in the same gang). She lived off benefits and was also subsidised by the beauty college she attended.

Kalisha – 25, African British, had a 6-year-old son. She was 14 when joining a gang to run away from problems in her family and to release her anger. She was not in a stable relationship with her son’s father when she got pregnant. Similarly to Jessica and Sheila, her son’s father was also in prison but Kalisha decided not to see him either herself or with their son. She decided to change when she learnt she was pregnant but only acted on that when she got to the 6th month (her partner went to prison again). She got back into education to get a Social Work diploma but was unemployed and living off benefits.

Jasmine – 33, Caribbean British, had 2 daughters aged 14 and 2. She joined a gang at the
age of 13 after having watched older people on the estate committing crime and feeling intrigued by that. She kept the relationship with her older daughter’s father until the daughter turned 6 months then split because of growing physical and verbal abuse. At the time of the interview, she was in an on and off relationship with a father of a younger daughter. Her change process started when she got the news of her 1st pregnancy. She was a motivational speaker and a campaigner on projects for youth at risk of joining/involved in gangs.

4.5 Personal reflections

The beginning of fieldwork involved a steep learning curve as it afforded me a chance to see what was going well and what was not, and adjust myself accordingly. In the first session of my interviews, I ran three (with Jessica, George and Tyrelle) and considering the nature of the interviews (narrative), the only question that I had in my agenda was “what happened next?” Jessica and George were happy with storytelling but Tyrelle became quite anxious that he had to generate a story by himself. He openly said that he had expected to be given questions that he would answer. In effect, his story was quite short (around 10 minutes) and I was generating questions on the spot in response to the story content. That made me realise that it is a very individual matter to what extent one feels comfortable to share his/her story without prompting.

In the second round of interviews (Jason and Sheldon) and all the others that followed, I was therefore prepared to be yet more attentive and make more notes throughout the interview in case I had to ask for more clarification/elaboration on the emerging issues. As a researcher, I was growing in confidence with every interview, did not feel intimidation from any of the interviewees, but for me as a person, every interview brought a different bag of emotions. There were interviews, which were overall uplifting in their tone (Desiree, Sheldon) with moments that we even laughed together. The majority however were simply painful and I thought about them for a long while after they had finished. It was hard, for instance, to listen to Trish or Aaron speaking about their childhood but the most memorable of all was the interview with Karim. Bitterness, anger, wishing for the better future intertwined with the lack of belief, confusion – all of these emotions permeated what Karim was saying but also how we was saying things. Others, like Trevor, Jasmine or Jason, spoke about their anger, which is very different – they did not come across as angry individuals. Regardless of the fact that I could not apparently relate to
Karim in any way being a white, educated, child-free female researcher, his story moved me the most and I felt he was the one I wanted most to succeed out of all the people I spoke to. I would not say I disliked any participant and vice-versa but with every individual one builds a different type of connection and thus each interview had its own dynamics.

Also, in hindsight, I see that the fact that the researcher (myself) was a female may have acted as a limitation. Precisely, male participants, being asked by a woman an array of personal questions pertaining to sensitive issues, were likely not to feel completely at ease on some occasions. At times, I also felt that they maybe wanted to impress me and could have coloured their involvement in a father’s role too much. Both factors, in turn, may have had an impact on how fathers produced their narrative. Mothers’ narratives did not appear to be affected in a similar way. However, as emphasised earlier, the intention was not to provide an objectively true picture but to learn about parents’ self-perception and how they had experienced parenthood to date.

4.6 Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed by means of a hybrid process of inductive and deductive thematic analysis. There are several factors that informed my choice of thematic analysis as an analytic tool in this study. The first of them was the nature of my research question. My question delved into lived experiences as opposed to abstract interpretations of experience as it is the case in, for instance, discourse analysis where the focus is on how meaning and knowledge are constructed through language-in-use (Starks and Trinidad, 2007). Second, with respect to the study purpose, my aims were to (1) understand parents’ hopes, expectations and actual experiences related to parenthood at a level of self-understanding and (2) understand the impact of these – if any – on links with a gang and on offending behaviour. I was driven by a goal to capture the meaning and common features of parents’ lived experiences of becoming parents as gang members. I did not aim to develop a novel theory to describe the findings, which is the objective of the grounded theory approach (Ryan and Bernard, 2000). Neither did I necessarily plan in the first instance to focus on language-in-use, that is, on how people use language to accomplish personal and social aims, the concern of discourse analysis (Starks and Trinidad, 2007). Third, bearing in mind ethical concerns, presenting entire narrative accounts might have turned out to be tricky, as participants would have become more identifiable (Hollway and
Jefferson, 2000). Finally, I had in mind the audience for my analysis. My analysis would generate detailed thematic accounts offering insight into the meaning of parenthood for young people involved in gangs. Naturally, the readers of this analysis would be those whose practice would be enhanced by a better grasp of how young parents live through their experiences, make sense of them and what they find most important whilst striving to carry on with their positive self-transformation.

Thematic analysis involved producing an organised and meaningful coding template. The excerpts were coded according to the perception of parenthood and responsibilities which parenthood entails, relationship with a child’s other parent, gang membership status in light of parenthood and so on. This type of analysis entails theory-driven deductive codes (Crabtree and Miller, 1999) based on the tenets of social phenomenology, which pinpoint themes anticipated to emerge throughout the analysis. If these codes later turn out to be not appropriate to the examined data, they are either modified or completely abandoned. Also, new, data-driven inductive codes (Boyatzis, 1998) are developed based on collected data and incorporated into an initial template. Once a final version was reached, the template was used as the foundation for the interpretation of the study data and the final write up of the results (Crabtree and Miller, 1999; Robson, 2002). Direct quotations from interview transcripts served to illustrate examples of the themes arising from the analysis.

I am aware that thematic analysis has received some criticism as a tool of analysis of narrative data. For instance, Hollway and Jefferson (2000) maintained that data coding fails to notice the form of the data and consequently does not spot that events or themes may have an effect on each other over the lifetime. They have also implied that coding prevents the researcher from seeing how individuals in a given category really differ from each other. Others, like Frost (2009, p.10), have also suggested that the analysis of narrative interviews should be directed at the “content, form and context of narratives while keeping the text as whole and unfragmented as possible”. Finally, there have been views that the apparent clarity resulting from data coding is only artificial and there is a risk of misinterpreting and/ or depreciating the value of the narratives, and detaching the individual’s story from his/ her environment (Mello, 2002). Although, I do see the grounds for that critique and I am aware of the benefits of providing a holistic account of participants’ narratives, I yet applied thematic analysis for the reasons presented earlier in this section.
4.7 Summary

This chapter has depicted and argued the methodology employed in my research study. What makes it stand out is its comparative nature – comparing and contrasting in one study the lived experiences of parenthood for both mothers and fathers with a history of gang membership. This is the novelty in the light of the previous research that used to employ a singular rather than a comparative perspective.

The subsequent three Chapters will provide the detailed illustration that emerged from data analysis: Chapter Five will elaborate on fathers’ and Chapter Six on mothers’ experiences, and Chapter Seven will offer the comparative evaluation.
Chapter Five: Where has the apple fallen?

This chapter will look into the accounts of eight inner-London fathers to provide an illustration of their pathways out of gangs following the experience of becoming a father. Examining the transformations that fathers’ embeddedness in a gang had undergone and to what extent these superficial behavioural changes were accompanied by the reworking of the sense of personal identity, I have inferred that both are largely intertwined as an adaptive response to fatherhood demands. There were differences between the fathers with regard to the timing when fathers positively embraced the new life role, in how able they were to make meaning of their past and how much ownership of the future they were taking. What all fathers appeared to have in common, regardless of how deep their self-transformation was, was that they had all acquired at least a rudimentary sense of paternal responsibility and had made a substantial shift from an egocentric to the other-oriented self. They grew their understanding that with any action taken, one had to factor in all the possible consequences. While studying the fathers’ narrative accounts, I focused predominantly on fathers’ understanding of the concept of fatherhood, whether the course of behavioural changes was necessarily overlapping with changes in core self and to what extent the change process as a whole was influenced by whether or not a father lived with his child/children. I have found that behavioural changes were highly circumstances-dependent hence their persistence could never be taken for certain and their success was irrevocably linked to the availability of viable opportunities. Several fathers’ accounts employed a redemptive narrative style accompanied by varied levels of personal agency. The more pronounced both were, the more chance the father had to sustain his desistance efforts despite challenges.

I commence by considering what “fatherhood” implied for interviewed fathers – what were the key priorities, how they wished to take on the status of role models for their children and how they carved their journey from negative to more positive masculinity. Next, I discuss the process of knifing-off from the gang; the process, which was gradual and vulnerable to socio-economical challenges and personal struggles. Permanent knifing-off was less likely to occur where gang embeddedness was high, the perception of an alternative lifestyle was low and support from pro-social others was scarce. Relatedly, permanence of behavioural changes appeared to be often affected by the number of children one had and how this interacted with environmental triggers. With regard to
identity changes within core self, most narratives pointed to redemption, that is, fathers believed that their “core self” was unspoiled and the criminal past did not therefore make a part of it but was just a byproduct of hostile environment. Their outlooks into the future varied with some fathers showing more self-belief and self-efficacy than others; some fathers got engaged in generative pursuits to reinforce their transition out of gangs. What consequently developed was a vivid portrayal of the transformative potential of fatherhood for males in gangs, a valuable extension to the existing UK-based gang research.

5.1 I am a father! But… what does it mean?

5.1.1 Masculinity and Father Identity

If we look at research on fatherhood from a wider perspective, we will be able to see that “father identity” is one of several possible alternatives that emerge in a hierarchy of multiple identities, which men can access at one point or other (Tichenor et al., 2011). After a gang member becomes a father, this varied array of identities gains an extra dimension of positive masculinity related to fatherhood. As Marsiglio and Pleck (2004) noted, this dimension of masculinity sits at the opposite end of the spectrum to the gang-related masculinity with the former encapsulated by practical (breadwinning) and emotional (guidance, support) responsibilities and the latter manifested through violence, dominance and so on. Fatherhood serves therefore as a litmus test of that positive masculinity; to what extent this negative gang-rooted masculinity gives way to fatherhood-induced positive masculinity. Every young man who has become a father needs one way or another to convey his own understanding of fundamental concepts of fatherhood and what it means to be a “good father”. The shared characteristics of males participating in this study hinted that their troubled past and current socio-economic situation cast uncertainty on how they would manage to develop a father role. On top of the fact that they had to meet standard expectations implied by fatherhood, they also had to be very much prepared for the struggle. Often, they would have to prove to others that their current role of a father should not be viewed through the prism of their “past life”. Any failures in living up to expectations would likely make others look for their roots in men’s difficult past and establish the link between the two. Once ensnared in the circle of divagations about causality, it seems inevitable that the past will be used to account for present failures and any success will be seen as against all odds. And this was indeed prevalent in most interviews.
Bearing that in mind, we turn to the first participant – Karim. At the time of the interview, Karim was unemployed and could not rely on any support from any member of his extensive family. He was living off benefits, effectively homeless and lived between friends’ houses. He had left prison 11 months before our interview where he had served a five-year sentence for a grievous bodily harm (GBH). When we met, he was an expectant father; his son was due literally the week after our interview. Karim was no longer in a relationship with his son’s mother; they broke up in the early stage of pregnancy because of his physical and verbal violence towards her. As he admitted, he was not there at all for his ex-partner during pregnancy:

Because we’d split up I missed the whole 9 months of pregnancy. I missed those crucial parts, those crucial months.

They did get back in touch shortly before she was due to give birth to their son. Another quote from Karim reveals that he longed to embrace a positive masculinity. Asked about his top priority, Karim responded:

So I want to try to be there as much as possible not just physically but emotionally. I want to be there, like I’ve said to her, when my son opens his eyes in the morning. So if it means that I’ve to travel to her house at 6 in the morning, I’ll do it. I want to be the last person he sees when he goes to sleep. If he’s crying in the middle of the night, I want to be the person to go in, put him on my chest and hug him. Those are precious things to me.

It is anticipated that the more one internalises this positive masculinity, the more one is able to permanently detach oneself from the gang-related negative masculinity. However, developing this positive masculinity is only the first step. One then needs to act upon it in a sustainable way, which, especially at the beginning, is far from easy. The particularly challenging aspect of fatherhood masculinity seems to be navigating the role of a breadwinner. Despite the fact that most young fathers’ aspirations, incentives and personal dispositions had dramatically changed, as evidenced for instance by their desire for a legitimate job, they were seldom in a convenient position to become breadwinners straight away. When viewed from young fathers’ perspective, the street life afforded them an opportunity to affirm their manhood and to earn quick, easy money if not completely by illegitimate means, at least by only partially legal means. Once fatherhood had become salient, there was an extra burden on young men to secure a good living for their children. Despite the fact that Karim maintained that he wanted to embrace this positive masculinity and, furthermore, considered himself to be a reformed ex-gang member, he was in a very
fragile position and appeared resigned to a return to street crime if he did not succeed at securing legitimate employment. As Karim acknowledged:

I’ll keep selling drugs and robbing. I’m being honest. I can’t get a job out there. I’m young, black, with a criminal record as long as my arm. There’s no job for me out there. So, the only way for me is to rob and sell drugs. So that’s what I’m gonna do. I’ll keep on doing it. So my kid don’t ever starve.

He was probably aware that the cost-benefit analysis of risk was not on his side and if he carried on enacting his street role, he had more to lose than to gain. At the same time however, he believed that selling drugs and robbing were the only “occupations” in which he could succeed, that is, get enough money to be able to support his child financially. And although Karim did not say that explicitly, looking holistically at his narrative, one may infer that he did not mean provision in the context of basic sustenance but rather being able to provide the conspicuous and tangible symbols of financial success. As a matter of fact, other young fathers including George and Tyrelle were pointing out financial responsibilities as an important mission to accomplish and there was prevalent worry among them whether they would be capable of handling them effectively. George, when asked about what the first thoughts were in his head when he saw his first son being born, replied:

I was nervous. I wasn’t sure whether I’ll manage to provide for my son.

He said to me that this breadwinning responsibility was his first and main worry. From what fathers’ accounts have showed, it appears that each young father handled these material responsibilities in their own way and had different resistance to the perspective of securing the money through easy i.e. illegal means. To fulfil the expectations, some fathers, like Karim, carried on doing what they thought they were most skilful at (in his case, drug dealing and robbing), some returned to these illicit strategies when subsequent children were born having found out that they were not able to handle the resulting financial pressure (e.g. George, Trevor). There were also fathers like Jason who gave up on looking for a job altogether and used money from benefits to make a living. We can try to look for the roots of this problem in the fact that these young fathers even with their desires of securing a legitimate employment were still former gang members. Therefore, they possessed more of what McCarthy and Hagan (2001) call “criminal social” and “criminal human” capitals, rather than their conventional equivalents meaning that they did not tend to belong to pro-social networks and they were highly trained in what was not going to bring them income in a legal employment market. They were further encumbered by a
criminal record. For instance, Jason was in prison for the last time at the age of 19 i.e. when his son was born. Before that, he had been incarcerated seven times; on four occasions these had been young offenders institutions. He was unemployed like Karim but had managed to secure stable accommodation and received a great deal of emotional, and financial support from his maternal grandmother (“nan”). He acknowledged:

My target is to get a legal job and for it to be permanent so I can get some regular money to support my family. Obviously, I buy material things for my kids but to an extent. My nan gives me money so I can buy things for my kids. When it comes to Christmas, birthdays, she always makes sure that I have money to buy my kids some gifts. Providing for my kids is not a problem whatsoever because I know that if I can’t do it, there’s someone there to do it for me.

All of these factors combined epitomise the most considerable impediment to a gang-member-turned-father’s capability to provide stability and security to his family and to desist successfully. The decay of job opportunities has led to this piercing and ever-present feeling of hopelessness about the future. Karim had been trying to find his way to the legitimate economy to be able to provide for himself and his son but without success. It was clear that he had already made up his mind – further offending was the part of his future plan. Karim had rationalised his involvement in criminal activity and neutralised the gravity of it by saying that this was all for his child’s sake; he would provide for his son by any possible means, which is well reflected in the quotation below:

I can’t let my son go a day starving. If the government ain’t gonna give me a job, listen, if someone asks me why I’ve done this, I’m gonna tell him “to feed my son cause you won’t give me a job.” So, what am I meant to do?

This would seem to imply that Karim wished to be financially present to the extent that he could permit himself to warrant the status of a father but this does not necessarily send out the message about his physical or emotional presence. The point of view comes across as material-centred and not really revolving around a child and his needs. Karim stressed that it was the government’s fault that nobody wanted to employ him and this context visibly influenced his decision to commit further crime. Yet, when he admitted that he was trying to make an indisputable change, the fact that he had been deeply embedded in a gang network for the past almost 15 years and virtually completely deprived of any pro-social links to mainstream society made it painfully challenging for him to make that change. Interestingly, as much as it was mainly being able to provide financially for a child that did seem to encapsulate the idea of fatherhood or even manhood for Karim, we see a visibly different approach in the case of Jason. Jason did not believe that being either a
breadwinner or at least partially contributing towards his children maintenance was a necessary condition for him to feel as a good and worthy father. He said:

I can’t really give my kids material things, but material things are not important. […] Being there for them is the most important, innit? Your kids will know that you’ve been a good dad from early.

First, Jason demonstrated his awareness that he was not able to provide materially for his children but at the same time negated that this was all that important in the first place; he did not hold himself accountable to fulfil the role of the breadwinner. On a different occasion, Jason highlighted that he had made numerous attempts to secure legitimate employment and had not yet succeeded. He perceived each rejection as a major blow to his sense of self-confidence. Not acknowledging the importance of a breadwinner role may therefore stem from the fact that Jason wanted to protect himself from emotional side effects of realisations of his lack of success thus far. And the conviction that there would always be someone who could take up his role in that regard was likely to have a very detrimental impact on motivation level and any efforts of self-improvement, and make any pro-active behaviour yet more unlikely. Also, Jason appeared to equate “being there for them” with “being a good dad.” Being there for your children is unquestionably an essential component of “good fatherhood” as long as it implies a high-quality relationship (e.g., Pedersen et al., 2015) because by itself may not be sufficient. Jason’s approach also seems to be very reductionist as there are other factors, which are also of crucial importance and cannot be disregarded (e.g. making long-terms plans to secure financial safety of one’s children).

5.1.2 Role models

Most fathers highlighted suffering from the lack of positive male role models in their own lives when growing up. They experienced both directly and indirectly a substantial volume of domestic abuse, substance misuse and gang involvement coming either from their fathers or other older males in their lives such as uncles, cousins or brothers. Only one father, Tyrelle, mentioned a male relative acting as a substitute male role model – he talked about his grandfather as a male positive figure in his life. Not having a first-hand experience of “responsible fatherhood”, fathers seemed to often think of their own role using negative framing i.e. what they should not be like as fathers rather than what exactly they should be doing. Aware of what their fathers had or rather had not done for them, they had to work out by themselves what being a father implied. Sheldon, Aaron and Jason’s accounts were
especially poignant representations of that personal quest for a meaning in the absence of their fathers as role models. I heard them saying:

When I was growing up, my dad wasn’t there. The only thing I can be grateful to my dad for is showing me how not to be a dad. (Sheldon)

Did I want my son to be who I had been and looked at me how I had looked on my dad? No. Did I want him to experience the lack of a father? No. So, I had to step up the game. I just didn’t know how to do it though. I didn’t have a template to follow. (Aaron)

I want my kids to look up to me as to a proper dad, a role model. Even though I may not be a successful person, I still want my kids to look up to me. […] It makes me feel a lot better that I’ve managed so far to be a good dad without any model. (Jason)

Last but not least, the prevalent wish coming from the fathers was that they wanted “to be there for their children.” This substantiates previous research demonstrating the fervent drive of young fathers to stay involved in their children’s lives (Dallas et al., 2000) regardless of unfavourable circumstances (Winstanley et al., 2002), rejection by their own fathers and first-hand experience of discrimination, and being the object of pre-judgement by others (Beymer, 1995). They desired to see their children to achieve more in life than they had themselves, to be resilient, to avoid mistakes that they had made. They also wished to grant them what they had never experienced themselves including living with personal safety, support and love that their own fathers had denied them. Embedded in these aspirations was the recognition of the fact that all that would not happen accidentally but that it called for fathers’ investment and agency. For instance, Tyrelle acknowledged that to him the most important part of his fatherhood was:

To be there for your kids, guide them, spend quality time with them and be there to catch them when they fall.

This quote denotes that becoming a father may have built up the desire to become more giving and less self-centred. The language Tyrelle used to portray this orientation on what was best for his daughter was quite sentimental and idealised. The likely reason for that may have been the will to reinforce the point of a lack of a father figure; that Tyrelle wished to do the completely opposite things as compared to his own father. However, I will reiterate that this was facilitated for him at least because he remained in a relationship with his daughter’s mother whereas all the other fathers were non-residential. There are clear practical limits to the ability to be there for the children if the latter is the case. This does not by any means imply that those fathers were absent but that the amount of time spent...
together was naturally reduced because of logistics. They still found it to be very important when they were able to be with their children as it was something they had hardly ever experienced themselves growing up. As Jason acknowledged:

I want to be there for them day in and day out. […] Being there for them is the most important, innit? Your kids will know that you’ve been a good dad from early. My kids see me a lot. I’m a good dad. I’m not a ghost-dad. My kids know who their daddy is. They are excited when they see me.

Aaron’s account appeared to resonate with that message:

It’s about spending time with your kids but not just being with them but spending quality time with them, nurturing and teaching them.

It was noticeable in the narratives that despite not living with their children, young fathers derived self-satisfaction from their father identity. They felt good about themselves as fathers and this feeling seemed to be even stronger once they made a downward comparison with their own fathers. These specific subjective facets of fatherhood experience seem to be as important in evaluating its potential as a life-changing event as a fact of becoming a father per se.

The following section will elaborate on how the fatherhood experience was likely to translate into observable behavioural changes within young fathers.

5.2 Breaking ties with a gang

The problem of lingering ties to fellow gang members is supposedly a good predictor of whether one will succeed or fail at desisting from street life (Pyrooz, Decker, and Webb, 2014). Sometimes, it may be difficult to unravel what the cause and the effect were in the process or what the role of mediating factors was but we can expect that most successful desisters would have been the ones gradually easing up on the amount of time spent with their gang friends. Naturally, we cannot shift the responsibility for one gang member’s actions onto others as in the end everyone makes decisions, good or bad, for himself. However, the membership in the anti-social network facilitates involvement in violence and acts of crime that a teenage individual might have not necessarily committed if he had

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8 When I followed that up with Jason i.e. what “a lot” meant to him, he was very defensive of his self-perception as a “present father” by responding: “More than once a week, I see them all the time. 2 times a week, 3 times a week, I see them whenever I want to. My kids see me a lot.”
not joined the group. Most fathers, if not all of them, very well knew in which direction their life was going; at the end of the road there could have only been a long prison sentence or death waiting for them. They could see both happening to friends around them. Fatherhood was credited for saving their lives rather than only changing them. The view of children as saviours was prevalent in most interviews with young fathers. Those fathers saw the child’s birth as a real “shocker” which would open their eyes and make them reflect on the path they had been taking in life. They also either explicitly said or implicitly put a message across that they would have been in a far worse position if their children were not around. With some fathers, especially Karim, it was clear that he implied that his life would not mean much if it was not for the fact he was just about to become a father. He admitted that:

If it wasn’t for my son now, I’d be either in jail doing life for murder or I’d be dead. [...] God saved me by giving me my little boy.

Also for Jason, the birth of a first child was already a big enough incentive to disappear from the streets:

Thanks to my kids, I’m still here today breathin’. I think, if I didn’t have them, I’ve done something very stupid long time ago. So, they saved me. I thank God for them.

Jake was another young father who wholeheartedly attributed his change to the birth of his daughter admitting:

I got stabbed 6 times on separate occasions but that had no effect on me; it never changed me. If it wasn’t for her, I think I’d have been in prison by now and straight down the drain. I think that either you’ve have to have a kid or something really, really bad needs to happen to you to get out of it.

Once a young man becomes a father, this usually has a great impact on where and with whom he decides to spend his time; being “out and about” with gang friends generally drops down in the hierarchy of priorities, which can be for instance observed in Jake’s narrative. He admitted:

My daughter is my flesh and blood. They’re just friends, you know what I mean? You can always make new friends.

What is also noticeable is the fact that young fathers framed this decision of distancing themselves from their gang peers as a conscious choice for the sake of their children.
Importantly, the process is very time-consuming and should be envisioned as a gradual drifting away rather than quick settling up of things once and for all:

I knew I had to keep my distance from a lot of old friends but I have never been a sheep so once I made that choice I just stuck with it. When I bump into people from my past, I would just come up with ways to keep the convo short. (Sheldon)

However, even if one puts his active membership to an end and stops hanging out on the street, there will be usually several people who one remains in touch with and keeps seeing, just the context of these meetings is different than before. As Sheldon continued in the above fragment:

There are some old friends that I still do talk to but not like before. It's more of a catch up thing.

Jake spoke in a similar tone:

A lot of my friends have ended up in prison but I still speak to the others and we text each other. They ask me to come out with them and help out with certain things, but I just say “no”. I still speak to them cause they’re my friends.

This seems to support Aldrige et al.’s (2008) and Pyrooz, Sweeten and Piquero’s (2013) conclusions that exit, like entry, is more of a qualitative shift in existing relationships – they become redefined rather than extinguished. Announcing oneself as an “ex” gang member does not imply cutting off all the contact with former gang associates. In truth, for young fathers in this study, no matter how much time had passed since gang exit, social and emotional links with a former gang were still quite pronounced. The question that remains is therefore whether such a person with “connections” still belongs to a gang regardless of self-reporting as an ex-gang-member? If we take self-report as a valid measure of gang membership, then this would mean that they are no longer gang members. One of the reasons why it was so hard to break all ties with a gang was that young fathers seemed to often look at the gang like at a close-knit circle of support. Even though being in a gang undoubtedly carried the weight of detrimental consequences both short- and long-term, in the eyes of young men who had joined it, it also seemed to encapsulate the cure to their problems in their often very unstructured lives. Some (e.g. George) perceived a gang to be a protector against victimisation that one would have otherwise been likely to fall prey to:
I joined them because I saw that as the only way to escape from troubles I had on the estate. I was running away from them and hiding but nothing seemed to be working. And to me at the time, the only chance of overcoming the beating that I was getting was joining the gang. (George)

Once in a gang, that initially induces this sensation of safety – when you find yourself in trouble, there will always be people to guard your back – but this seems to be rather what these young people want to believe in whereas the reality happens to be very different. It seems that after the birth of his children, Jason was not left with any illusions when it comes to actual “loyalty” in the gang:

You wanna call them your boys. Yeah, brother, you can be sure they’re not your boys. You believe they’re your boys but when it comes to the crunch, they’re not going to be there for you, bruv. These boys that you lie down for, they’re not going to be down for you. (Jason)

The similar message was echoed in a few other accounts, especially that of Theo and Tyrelle. This disillusionment with “fraternal life” and the resulting clash with reality can be harsh but the truth is that for many, at least at the beginning, the gang almost acts as a surrogate for the family, filling the ubiquitous void in their daily lives.

5.2.1 Announcement of a new social role and validation by others

An essential stage during the process of transition into a new social role is the authentication of this event. The majority of us let others know in one way or the other that we have just embraced the new roles of spouses, parents, employees and so on. Nonetheless, there is no analogical validation of one’s disengagement from a gang or any other anti-social network. In this case, we rather deal with a type of self-certification as an ex-gang member or, alternatively, some relevant other such as one’s gang or the police endorse the individual’s change (Decker, Pyrooz, and Moule, 2014). This is interesting because it may in some ways also help explain the large number of ex-gang members wishing to do prevention work (as a way of getting that “certification”). If this does not occur, any plans of giving up a negative social role may turn out to be very short-lived. It is purely a self-fulfilling prophecy, that is, the lack of recognition of your positive change by others may completely eradicate the chances of long-term success. This was even too clear in what Karim said:

I’m confused. I worked to become a youth worker and take young youths out of gangs. I tried to do the course in jail. But every time I tried, they shot me down. One governor said to me in 2010, I came out on parole for a
month, “I’ll see you in a month time.” What happened? She saw me in a month time. Straight back in. So I became that person they wanted me to become. That known gang member. That known villain. The rude and obnoxious one and all of that. It pisses me off just talking about it.

Karim since his release from prison was trying to get rid of that label but so far that proved to be virtually impossible. It is not only about the police, family, any potential employer treating him through the prism of that “villain” as he said himself but his gang peers and rival gangs never really started to consider him as an “ex”:

The other day someone said to me and my cousin that they’re gonna shoot us. I got told I was gonna get shot cause I’m trying to help someone. I said to my godfather “It’s like everyone wants me to come back. They want me to come back. They want me to step back into the show again.” That’s what people want.

“They” all wanted Karim to go back because they never felt that he had left the gang in a first place. If he had been able to move out from the area, this could have at least to some extent had a counteracting effect but, as I have mentioned above, he did not have the means to do so. Other young fathers like Trevor and Jason spoke about experiencing “some trouble” for their decision of leaving a gang but that beating carried a validating effect in a sense that they were “not bothered” afterwards. Undoubtedly, the fact that they were both able to move to different areas also had a positive impact:

They ended up following me and when I left, they were trying to do something to me which, let’s say, wasn’t nice. They tried to get me beaten up and shot. I stopped talking to them completely and I moved to Lambeth. (Trevor)

I can go anywhere I want. A lot of people can’t do that but I can. I’m not with nobody so I can talk to anyone. Of course, people disliked me that I wasn’t up for beefs no more. That’s why I’ve moved out from the area. I knew that sooner or later I’d be beefing the people I’d used to go out with because I don’t go out with them no more. (Jason)

Another aspect of relevance that has come up in the narratives with regard to severing the ties is wiping out the contacts to former gang peers be it by changing a phone number and/or social media accounts and not divulging the details to any random people:

I would try and avoid giving my number out. (Sheldon)

Jake was the only young father, who seemed to actually get at least some understanding from fellow gang members in relation to why he had decided to leave the gang. The reason for that may be that fellow gang members did actually have deeper connection than just the
one stemming from the mere fact of belonging to the same gang. Jake on multiple occasions indicated that they had all been friends first since early childhood and only later formed a gang as teens, which started to grow further. Even him, however, initially was looked at with suspicion but that subsided quite quickly and gave place to acceptance and consequently validated his decision to leave:

Some of my friends didn’t like it when I told them that I don’t want to hang out no more so I had a bit of trouble at the beginning. I got beaten up. They kept on asking “why are you leaving us?” I sat down with them and explained to them “Look, I’ve known you since I was 6. We did a lot of stupid things together. But now I’ve got a kid and need to focus on her.” And a lot of them were ok with it. I still speak to them cause they’re my friends. (Jake)

There are several important inferences that can be made based on this section. First, lingering ties to the gang are not without an effect on the victimisation rate once an individual had disengaged from his gang as those having more ties (e.g. Karim, Trevor) more frequently fell victim or were at increased risk of being the object of retaliation. This reinforces the role of neighbourhood change in a bid to maintain continued desistance. Last but not least, once we decide to classify a given individual as an “ex-”, this triggers an array of uncertainties for a researcher. This happens because making an assertion about the status of an “ex-“ does not functionally signify the decay of all contacts with former gang peers. In fact, young fathers in this study who had disengaged from a gang a considerably long time ago (e.g. Jake, Jason) still kept ties with some former gang peers. This issue is at the heart of many gang definition-related discussions (Esbensen et al., 2001; Klein and Maxson, 2006) and therefore deserves more thorough investigation.

5.2.2 Generativity

The previous section has implied that becoming a “professional ex“ may serve for gang members as a means to achieve certification of their reinvented self. Maruna (2001) and White (2000) are some of the advocates of a coping mechanism among both desisting offenders and recovering substance abusers revolving around becoming a “professional ex” or a “wounded healer.” It is important to think of how an individual may reinvent him/herself at the same time embracing his/her criminal past. In essence, what happens is that these individuals make use of their past stories to empower those who are not as advanced in their recovery/desistance process; they are seen as examples to follow. According to Maruna (2001, p.117), “the desisting self-narrative frequently involves reworking a
delinquent history into a source of wisdom to be drawn from while acting as a drug counselor, youth worker, community volunteer, or mutual-help group member.” For instance, a former gang member, helping out in the support group for those who wish to find their way out, has a first-hand knowledge of “having been there too” (Humphreys, 2004, p.15). And, as a successful desister, one can offer worthy insight and the lessons learnt from personal experiences (Maruna, 2001). The whole process seems to be of mutual benefit – the “helper” shares his/ her story and, at the same time, reinforces his/ her own learning, takes more ownership of his/ her life, becomes more self-confident and fulfilled, makes a meaning of his/ her past and so on (Maruna, 2001; Toch, 2000). In this study, several young fathers, notably George, Aaron, Jake and Trevor, spoke about their engagement in outreach youth work and mentoring. They took a great sense of accomplishment by helping other young people, who were in the situation that they had once been in themselves. George, for instance, expressed how frustrated and disappointed he had been with social workers that he had come across on his pathway to desistance. He said that he had become disillusioned with the quality of support and that it had not at all been tailored to address his needs. Based on his first-hand experience, he believed he had the knowledge of issues that were not generally adequately targeted and he wished to contribute in those. When asked about what motivated him to become a youth worker, George admitted:

I want to become a youth worker because I want to offer help and support that I felt I failed to receive when I was going through problems.

At the time of my interviews with young fathers, both Jake and Aaron were involved in the work with young people trying to find their way out of gangs. Jake was doing it on a volunteering basis for the police in the neighbourhood he had used to live in. He knew personally many of the young people he was helping (from the time he had been in a gang) and some of them, knowing his successful story, were intentionally seeking contact with him. His narrative corroborated what has been said earlier, that is, young gang members seeking their way out find those with whom they share a similar life story as more credible; they are more likely to look at them as potential identity models. A successful desister by “being there and back” gets a credible insight and therefore can empower would-be-desisters that turning the life around is a realistic thing to achieve, which is illustrated in Jake’s words:

I ended up working with the police to help them with the gang issue. I just went to the police and said that I want to help. Because of my experience, I
can liaise with certain people that the police can’t liaise with. They trust me more than they trust the police. And I have five people so far that I’ve helped to get out of the gang. They’ve moved out of the area, two of them got back into education.

Aaron, on the other hand, was working in one of London secure units. His narrative implied that for him generativity was so important because it both fulfilled him and was self-exonerating. He was feeling meaningful and useful as a youth worker, which was only highlighted by his strong conviction that his son could be proud of him; something he had never been able to say in relation to his own father. All of that fits into Maruna and Ramsden’s (2004) idea of reparation, that is, “redemption scripts tend to be characterised by recurrent themes of reciprocity, mutual obligation, restitution, making amends, and “carrying the message” to others.” The fact that Aaron was drawing a sense of achievement from his work also helped him recognise that his past behaviours had been wrong and he moved on from them establishing a self-respecting identity. When asked about what the prime reason was that he enjoyed his work so much, he replied:

When my son asks me “Daddy, what do you do? My friend’s daddy does this and what do you do?” I can give him an answer. He can go back to school and say that his daddy works with young people. He doesn’t have to lie. He can be proud. I’ve never had that. I’ve never had a chance to be proud of my dad.

He had that sparkle of passion in his eyes when talking about his work. I could really see that he was very content with what he was achieving and he was ambitious with regard to the future.

Last but not least, Trevor was drawing a great deal of self-fulfilment and satisfaction from his engagement in a special initiative called the Young Dads programme:

I’ve been involved with Young Dads group for just over a year now. Ultimately, I want to work as a community youth worker. It’s a real challenge but I enjoy it and I’m passionate about it.

He had received constant support from the Young Dads group himself over the past years so, by the taking up a role of a giver, he felt that in a way he was paying back his debts.

Based on what any of these young fathers said, we can infer that generative pursuits provided them with a sense of re-connection with the society. This engagement with others, rather than just uniquely with oneself (even if self-healing seems to be a prime reason behind generativity), happens to play an important role in a desistance process. As
involvement in generative pursuits finds its way to the heart of fathers’ identity narratives, taking at least some of the attention away from egocentricity, this allows for a transition from retrospective anger to prospective optimism.

The next section will focus on how the behavioural changes may be accompanied by transformations in one’s sense of identity.

5.3 Narratives of change

The life accounts of desisting gang members retain their composure in a sense that although self-narratives are not stagnant, this evolution generally entails internally coherent changes rather than a complete revolution in a prior self-story. When viewed from this perspective, it is more about the past being rewritten rather than a frenzied burial of one’s old self for the sake of “being born” again as an individual. What seems to be very crucial is that desisters need to build a credible self-story with regard to why they decided to desist to make themselves believe that the change is really occurring here and now. Desistance is easier said than done because there will always be obstacles on the way and having a mere “wish” to desist is just not sufficient (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009).

What young fathers appeared to have in common was that, before they became fathers, they had all seemed to have lived in their own self-centred microcosms, in which they had overlooked any implications of their behaviour on others as exemplified in Sheldon’s account below:

I never had a reason before to change because every decision I made only affected myself. I know it sounds selfish because it affects your family and that but, like I’ve said, I was quite an independent child and I didn’t care about what anyone else was thinking.

Now, fatherhood had given them a clear focus, there was somebody else who they had to be responsible for, who they had to look after and that was an opportunity for them to make their life more future-oriented. It seems (Schafer, Ferraro, and Mustillo, 2011) that both the ability to direct oneself onto the future and forward planning are vital in assessing the high-risk individual’s potential of successful transition to adulthood. In the young fathers’ narratives, there was a prevalent message that as much as prior to fatherhood they had used to focus on “here and now”, once they became fathers, they did actually start thinking about the future:
Before I became a dad, I hadn’t really used to think about the future. Now, I feel excited about the future and about every day that I spend with my children. I wouldn’t change this experience for the world. (Trevor)

By taking up a future-oriented approach, a lot of young fathers reconsidered the costs and benefits of their further involvement in a gang. It is very likely that at least to some extent this change stems from maturation with age but the maturation processes are strongly intertwined with entering a parental role. The implications of embracing gang-rooted masculinity with all its potential costs including punishment, being a victim of violence or in the worst-case scenario also death are undoubtedly detrimental for any young person. However, these costs surely increase for young fathers who have more to lose than to gain in the case of continued membership. At this stage, if they found themselves in prison, that would not only be about the subjective experience of it but also about its effect on their children; they would miss out on the time when they can see them grow, they would be simply absent. As Karim admitted:

I have my son on the way. I’m gonna be a dad. I’ve got to think about my life now, innit? I have to think that if I die, what’s gonna happen? Do you see where I’m coming from?

How did a young fathers’ hierarchy of values change? The fact that they had become fathers prompted many of them to look at their life from a different perspective, made them reassess their past behaviours and make a revolution in their priorities in life. Jason, when asked to think of himself before he became a father, told me:

I love them too much. I’ll do nothing stupid. If you knew me from years ago and you’d see me today you’d know I’ve changed. When I was younger, I was mad. I didn’t think. I just used to do and thought after. But now I think before I do, you get me?

Other fathers, like Sheldon, recounted that when they had got used to that thought that they would become young fathers, they had actually felt for the first time that quick and easy money, and that frenzy of adrenaline that being out on the street had used to give them did not at all need to top the list of priorities. When Sheldon’s older daughter was being born, he was in prison for the robbery he said he had not committed. On the very first night he was back in prison, this realisation came to him:

It was then when my mind-set changed in a lot of things. I distanced myself from everyone. I now had a new priority, a new focus. I was thinking that I needed to get out for my daughter. Because when I was growing up, my dad wasn’t there.
Sheldon recounted that his two daughters had made him “push for change” and eventually saved him; the connection between his experience of becoming a father and the self was aimed at reflective, internal aspects of his own functioning. When I asked Sheldon to reflect on how he felt about himself as compared to five years before, he responded:

My daughter kind of changed me as a person, she kind of taught me this element of control even if you don’t have any.

To hear Sheldon saying that was interesting because a child cannot really consciously teach these things. Yet, children are likely to have an impact on social support and control because taking on a new role, that is, of a parent possibly elicits new behavioural expectations from others towards a new parent. The societal norm is that being a responsible parent and continued gang membership are mutually exclusive. Therefore, a parent may reorient himself like Sheldon did; in such a way that personality develops to bring about psychological maturity and greater emotional stability (Monsbakken, Lyngstad, and Skardhamar, 2013). Sheldon said that thanks to his daughter he had learnt to control his temper. Even when he was coming across situations causing a lot of anxiety, he was no longer so prone to becoming indignant and/or frustrated. He did not allow himself to get permanently trapped in a vicious circle of negativity but stayed focused and grew in resilience. This is only one of few examples in his narrative to account for the fact that his change was not only action-oriented (e.g. doing a vocational course, looking for employment) but that substantial changes had also occurred with respect to his inner world. Asked about his biggest dream for the future, he responded:

I want to have my own successful business and be in a position to be pushing for so much more that I ever had growing up and I don't mean the material items. I mean to have that drive to want so much more out of life.

This is without a doubt a very poignant message especially if it is put in relation to what Sheldon said about what had driven him into a gang in the first place, that is, “at the end of the day the objective was to get money.” Now, speaking about his dream of having his own business, his aspirations did not seem to be purely money-driven. Right on the contrary, he longed for this sense of achievement, making an effort, which would bring a positive outcome and a sense of self-development. In contrast to Jason, Sheldon did not seem to purely react to situations that had happened to him but his narrative gave evidence that his change process was also self-motivated. He came across as a very persistent and resilient individual. He admitted his life was a struggle but he was not giving up:
It’s not easy. I need to jump through a lot of hoops but I’m not going to use any of that as an excuse. If I have to jump through hoops, I’ll jump through hoops; anything for my daughters.

There is no doubt that Sheldon had a great deal of self-awareness and devotion to his daughters and that he would work hard not to jeopardise his chance to be a good father. Last but not least, with regard to Jake, when I asked him how he had ended up being supported by St Michael’s⁹, his answer revealed that he was capable of and willing to take his own initiative and search solutions to his problems rather than to wait for them to resolve by themselves. He admitted:

I was struggling a bit how to be a dad so I started to search for help on the Internet. I was looking for dads’ groups and St Michael’s came up. I rang them up, said what age I was and they told me to come down. And that was 2 years ago. They took me in and a while ago myself, I’ve started to volunteer for St Michael’s and I enjoy it.

Jake acknowledged that it had taken him a long while before he realised what it meant to be a father and that, especially at the beginning, he found childcare duties both challenging and daunting. However, despite daily struggles, he did not drift away but remained focused and proactively looked for help. It implies that he was striving to make an effort for the sake of his daughter; he wanted to learn and did not run away from responsibilities. Although it was not always easy for him, especially when boredom was getting to him – “I struggle sometimes when I have nothing to do” – he was resilient and his daughter remained his focus. Jake's narrative, similarly to Sheldon’s, gave evidence of self-awareness and a conscious, and forward-looking perspective.

When young fathers reflected on their lives, they strived to find some purpose for the periods of their lives for which they could not show any accomplishments. Such rationalizations most often implied that if it had not ben for a certain lived experience, fathers would have not realised the actual priorities in life. The past experiences marked with negativity were linked to the present in a way to make the present feel as if it had come naturally, almost unsurprisingly. Several fathers’ narratives including for instance that of Tyrelle conveyed that past wrongdoings had made them wiser and stronger – thanks to them they had acquired life wisdom and emotional strength that gave the “good” the chance to come out. Tyrelle for instance admitted:

⁹ St Michael’s runs the Young Dads programme offering guidance and support to young fathers in Lambeth (London), aged 24 or under who are gang-involved/ gang-affiliated/ at risk of joining gangs.
I wasn’t born that kind of person I was brought up that kind of person. That way of life was familiar to me so I felt comfortable with it but did I really want to be in it? No but I thank God for my past because my past has made me who I am today. I changed completely.

This quote very much reads like a component of Maruna’s redemption script: that was “not the real me”, there was a core good person waiting to come out. Tyrelle made a distinction between his “true self” that was good all along and his “past behaviours” that had been triggered by the environment he had been growing up in. Likewise, what Jason was saying, also resonated with a redemptive tone. According to him, “whatever bad” he had done in the past was his response to the system, which in his eyes did not treat him fairly. His “core self” was unspoiled and the criminal past did not therefore make a part of it but was just a byproduct of hostile environment. As Jason specifically admitted:

I have a good heart. I just need to find someone who will give me a chance.

Having said that, his account did not give much evidence of him pro-actively creating opportunities for himself. Jason seemed to rely on “good luck” and chance; his passivity and lack of a pro-active approach persisted. With regard to the future, Jason again came across as a person manifesting a low level of personal agency. He did not establish himself as an active doer who would persistently create experiences and opportunities for himself so his two children could count on stable upbringing. Rather on the contrary, he appeared to be reactive to the situations that were happening to him. The most striking example of that was when I asked Jason about how in the long-term he was going to make sure that his children would be well provided for. He responded:

Providing for my kids is not a problem whatsoever because I know that if I can’t do it, there’s someone there to do it for me. A job will come sooner or later.

The lack of motivation and long-term thinking, and forward planning with regard to his responsibility for the material security of his children is conspicuous in the quote above. Especially, Jason’s last sentence is very poignant – he did not say that he would be actively looking for a job and that, hopefully, he would eventually manage to get one but that the job would simply find itself. I believe this distorted wishful thinking may have simply served Jason as an ego defence mechanism from failure that he would most likely feel if he kept on trying to get a job and would constantly face rejection. Sabotaging his chance by not trying may serve as “the best available excuse for not living up to expectations” (Baumeister, 1991, p.154).
5.3.1 Change as a process

Despite the fact that some young fathers seemed to think of their change as sudden, as if they had changed their point of view about gang membership and life in general pretty much overnight, their behaviour changed tangibly only over time. This brings us back to the issue earlier discussed in the literature review, that is, desistance should be looked at as a process (Benda, 2005; Kazemian, 2007; Maruna, 1999), which takes time and is a derivative of changes occurring in several spheres of life including relationship status, employment, parental status and so on. Even if young men solemnly declared that, after they had become fathers, they rapidly and effortlessly re-evaluated what mattered to them the most in life, we need to be critical about such statements. They may have started to think of themselves as ex-gang members, they may have said that now their children were of prime importance in life and that they would have done nothing to jeopardise the chance of simply being “good fathers”. However, it does not in any case mean that this change in the approach was immediately translated into behavioural and identity changes (in some cases this “wish of change” may never end up being fully executed). It is a time-consuming process to practically adapt one’s life to the needs of a child, to find a legal job often having a criminal record and to drift away from the people one used to spend so much time with. Karim was the most striking example that reflected this disparity between the rates at which changes in attitude and behaviour unfold. On the one hand he said:

I’m not a gang member no more. I’m a reformed gang member. That’s how you call it, yeah?

On the other hand, robbing and drug dealing remained part of his future plan to provide for his son should he not found legal employment. His example is a compelling argument that one should never conflate disengagement from a gang and desistance from offending as the former may but does not have to lead to the latter. Another important issue to note with regard to the change process is when it actually began for young fathers. Eight young fathers’ narratives provided an incredibly varied array of possible scenarios. Two fathers – Jason and Jake – pointed to the moment of learning about their partner’s pregnancy as a strong enough trigger that instilled in them a desire to change. With regard to Jason, this is how he commented on the moment, when he learnt that he would become a father:

When I found out that my girlfriend was pregnant, I was on the run. There was an arrest warrant for me. […] So, I went to the police, handed myself in, said who I am, went straight to jail and came out after a few months. I came out just on time to be there when my son was born. When she told me she was pregnant, I had to grow up. I preferred to hand myself to the police
and do the time, do a gentleman thing and be done with it. Otherwise, they would have caught me at the wrong time.

The vision of prison was petrifying to him, as were the implications – he would have missed out on seeing his son and daughter growing up. As a father of two children, he saw the threat as more grave than ever before. Moreover, Jason, on a few occasions, signalled that the fact of him getting older and the subsequent change in approach to things that once had used to give a thrill and excitement also played its role in the changing process. He said:

I’m done and dusted with this lifestyle. I’m too old for that, I’m just too old. You can’t be a gangster forever. That shit was boring. There must be a point in your life when you forget about this shit.

It is therefore apparent that, in his case, disengagement from a gang and desistance from offending that accompanied it were the result of complex interactions between fatherhood, the risk of imprisonment and age. With regard to Jake, he was taken completely by surprise when he learnt that he would become a father and he did actually run away from home albeit for three days. When that initial shock subsided, he did come back and stayed by his partner’s side all the way through pregnancy. He reasoned that, once a father, the natural implication was that he needed to change and to shift his priorities. He maintained:

I don’t want my baby mum to have tell my daughter “oh, look, your daddy is in prison” cause I’ve done this or got caught with that.

Neither Jason nor Jake since then found themselves having any problems with the law and kept following the new pathway they had decided to take.

The second pattern that seemed to emerge from fathers’ accounts entailed the initial ambivalence to the news about the forthcoming fatherhood represented by Sheldon and Aaron. Sheldon admitted that it had not hit him at all when he had got pregnancy news and that he could not even recollect what he had felt back then. Shortly after, he found himself in prison and once he was released, his daughter was almost a 13-month-old girl. Similarly, Aaron, upon learning that he would become a father, had no longer been in a relationship with his son’s mother. He did not recollect feeling either positive or negative emotions. He had practically shunned the news admitting that he had not been there even once for his son’s mother during pregnancy and only showed up during birth. Second, their accounts put the message across that fatherhood by itself had not had a direct effect on their identity change but that there had been some other factor present. In the case of
Sheldon, he believed that the experience of prison in those particular circumstances had affected his mind-set and made him willing to change so that his daughter would not go through the experience of living without a father, which he had gone through. As I have mentioned earlier, the sentence was for a crime Sheldon claimed to have never committed. We can only hypothesise what would have happened if he had not gone to prison; whether those realisations would have come to him at all at that early stage. After his release in March 2012, Sheldon was homeless and did not have any family to support him (his mother had moved back to Jamaica during his sentence); and he spent a year living in a hostel. Also, he had to come to grips with social services, which had got involved with his daughter, as his daughter’s mother had been struggling with childcare duties at the time he had been in prison. He felt he had only one person he could turn to, a youth worker who had known him for 10 years. Against all odds, Sheldon did not give up on making his ambitions come true, he persevered and, at the time of our interview, was a working man, with dreams of having his own business one day and, importantly, a proud father of two daughters. Speaking of his transformation, Sheldon said:

When my older daughter was born, that changed because then every decision I made not only affected me but also affected her. […] With the second one it’s different, because I had already been pushing with change from before. I had to change and I never looked back.

With regard to Aaron, he had hoped that seeing his son for the first time would serve as an immediate trigger for his change but this had not happened. He admitted:

I only showed up when she was giving birth. And I actually cried, I’d never seen before a baby being born and that was my son after all. […] I knew I have to love him because he is my son but it didn’t really sink in, it didn’t register that I’d just become a father. To be honest with you, I thought my son will change me but he didn’t. My son didn’t have no impact on my life. My life was still messy, during the pregnancy and after.

The mediating force in his case, which opened up his eyes to joys of fatherhood and taught him to appreciate it and see it as a gift, was finding faith. One of Aaron’s fellow gang peers who had found God first encouraged Aaron to accompany him to church and that is where four years ago his life took a different turn. Asked about the role that finding faith played in the process, Aaron responded:

In church, I was watching the people and learning. They taught me how to be assertive and drift away from bad things as my son became my priority. And I wouldn’t have known all of that if I hadn’t let God in. I wouldn’t be where I’m now, I wouldn’t be the father I am, if I haven’t found God.
Aaron pointed to a “higher power” as his saviour; he was saved and given moral direction, and purpose by something bigger than himself. From what he said, we can infer that, most likely, if it had not been for building that relationship with God, Aaron would have not diverted from street life until much later or possibly even not at all. It was only then when the actual transformation process began for him – he reordered his priorities and started to distance himself from his gang peers.

The third pattern that could be distinguished emerged based on Trevor and George’s narratives. They both had been motivated to change since the birth of the first child, but had found themselves incapable of providing material security for their children by legal means. When Trevor found out that his partner was pregnant, he was on bail. In the end, Trevor found himself in prison anyway and this happened literally a few days before his daughter was born. He was released when she was 6-months-old. He explicitly stated that:

I was on bail for a year and during that time my partner got pregnant and I started transforming my life.

He left prison with a mind-set that he would not get back on the street and would make up for the lost time with his daughter. He was very emotional talking about building relationship with her and that she was like his talisman that he would take everywhere with him. However, before Trevor really came to grips with his first-time fatherhood, he received the news that his partner had become pregnant with a second child, a son. Hence, Trevor saw himself returning to a starting point as illustrated below:

This had an opposite effect on me. Instead of thing more positive and that “yes, now I really need to get a job” I was thinking “I need to make quick money now to afford that”. […] I started smoking and drinking again. I didn’t like when she got pregnant, I was very upset then. I slipped back into gang life. With them I felt stress-free. This time I was doing worse things than I’d been doing before.

What then happened however was that Trevor was put in contact with the support organisation and with their assistance he managed to go back to college and also completed a training course for a community youth worker. That gave him a chance to find a new point of reference and successfully maintain his desistance efforts.

When it comes to George, he was not happy at all when he heard the news that he would become a father at the age of 17. He was not in a relationship with his son’s mother and her pregnancy came unplanned. George told her to get rid of the baby and he did not see or hear from her for the next 5 months. Then, he met her by coincidence and found out she
was still pregnant with their son. George only ever saw his own father in photographs (he had left the family before George turned one) so he made a promise that he would always be there as a father to his son. However, for the remaining four months of pregnancy, he continued the same lifestyle. As he recounted:

It still didn’t feel real and it didn’t hit me that I’ll be a dad so I carried on living my life. Few months later I got a phone call that she was rushed to hospital and that baby was on its way. And it wasn’t until I heard the baby crying for the first time when I realised that this is me, I’m holding myself right now, this is my flesh and blood.

He did actually report that once he saw his son for the first time, he felt a great desire and motivation to provide a good life for him. He was looking forward to playing his role in his upbringing. However, at that time, he was not really on good terms either with his mother or stepfather and he could not rely on meaningful support from them or any one else in his family. That coupled with his futile attempts to secure any legal employment eventually led him back to the street and into drug dealing. The analogous situation took place when, around a year later, he got the news he would become a father for the second time, with a different partner. Again, he had a plan to give up street life and to find legal means of income but, like earlier, every door closed in front of him. Stuck in that vicious circle of “criminal record, no job”, he would do whatever was bringing money home including drug dealing, robberies and car thefts. This time, there was however one difference, that is, George’s thinking processes had changed, he became reflective and started to look on his actions from a different perspective. He did not display any external attribution of blame, he only held himself accountable for past actions as seen below:

Some people make it look that they do bad things because they didn’t have a choice. That’s not true. You always have a choice.

He realised that the things he was providing for two children were “bought for dirty money, not money that he’d honestly worked towards.” On top of that, his brother, who was serving 10 years in prison, started telling George how much the mentoring scheme he had participated in changed his views about his past actions and made him constructively think about the future after release. Consequently, George became pro-active and started seeking practical solutions to break the vicious cycle he was in. He managed to find and secure a place on a training programme for youth workers, signed up to and finished college, and then he learnt that he would be a father for a third time. For George, the sustainable change did not come therefore until his third child was born. As he confessed:
When, my 3rd child was on the way, I decided that I’m not coming back to drugs any more to earn money, not going back to gang life. So, only with the third child I realised that I don’t want to carry on back and forth, back and forth.

Although his situation became yet more difficult to handle financially, he remained focused. Eventually, after having completed yet another training programme, he secured a job as a part-time youth mentor and was juggling that with a part-time work as a sales assistant.

Tyrelle’s narrative illustrates a yet different pattern. It seems that for him two major factors played a role in how he embraced the thoughts about fatherhood. First of all, serving a prison sentence (he did not want to admit why he had been incarcerated), he became increasingly disillusioned with his gang peers. His belief that a gang was a family, where loyalty and commitment ruled, turned into a sour disappointment when literally not even one person he had been “gang friends” with ever visited him in prison. Instead, the people who did support him all throughout were his best friends from childhood who were not associated with gangs. Second, Tyrelle always wanted to become a father but he was aware at the same time that in the state he was (in prison, with lingering ties to a gang), he would have not been the father he had envisioned himself to be. Due to his personal experience, he was very mindful of how a destructive family environment might influence a child. He therefore made a conscious decision that before becoming a father, he would have first needed to drift away from the gang and to find a partner who had no associations with gangs and crime. Tyrelle argued that:

I didn’t have a picture of a girlfriend, of a child or a sibling. And that made me think that I need to stop what I’m doing before I become a dad. And if you find a partner who is into same sort of gang crap, you’re both going to be dysfunctional parents. So, I knew that I’ll have to find a girlfriend that wasn’t like me, that wasn’t doing the things I was doing so that she can be a good mum to our children. With that mind-set I left prison.

Last but not least, the fifth different scenario emerged based on Karim’s account. Before he became a father to a son in 2013, he had been about to become a father twice but both pregnancies had ended with a miscarriage. On the first occasion, he had been seventeen-years-old and just sentenced to five years for a GBH. It was only his third day in a cell when he got a telephone call that his then-girl-friend had lost their child. This is how he described what he had felt back then:

I felt anger. I was looking forward to it. Even though I was in jail, I was
thinking that when I come out, my son or my daughter is going to be there. The world caved in for me, nothing mattered any more. [...] I’m in jail, I may as well stay here, that’s how I was thinking. I didn’t really care. I used to run around on the wings stabbing people in the necks with razors as soon as I’d open my door. That was just me. That was my life. I was thinking “This is the end. This is the end for me now. There’s nothing outside for me no more. That’s how I felt.

Karim was released from prison in August 2012. He recounted that over those five years in prison his mind-set had changed and his approach towards what he wanted from life was considerably different from that at the onset of his sentence. He came out with the strong conviction that he was not going back to street life, that this part of his life was gone. However, harsh reality soon enough thwarted all his plans and he was back “to same old things again” as he said. He found himself in a typical catch-22 situation with no home, no employment and no family to support him. A couple of months after his release, two incidents happened which made Karim put things into perspective. First, his god-brother fell victim to a “honey trap” and was shot dead just weeks after having left prison. Second, he got to know that the girl he had just met was pregnant with his child. Unfortunately, Karim had to relive again the experience from five years back because that pregnancy also ended with miscarriage. Shortly after however, his partner fell pregnant again and that had a happy ending. Under the influence of the child’s mother, he did try to distance himself from his gang peers. That however proved to be a gruelling task as Karim did not have the means to move out of the area and where he was living everybody knew him and what is more, everybody expected him to go back to his old life. At the time of our interview (July 2013), despite his attempts, he did not seem to be able to avoid finding himself in situations, which put him under a lot of risk. For instance, during the New Year’ Eve party 2012/2013, he had almost lost his life sustaining severe knife wounds from somebody who had grievance against him from years before his sentence. I could see that Karim had the awareness that having a son had some transformative potential. His manner and mood lightened when speaking about him, when he discussed what kind of father he was going to be and was actually quite self-confident that he would do well as a father. However, at the same time, when he was telling his story, it seemed that these dreams might likely be jeopardised by the density of pro-criminal risks and linkages he had acquired as well as the lack of legitimate employment. On some occasions, for instance, when Karim was saying “I’m not a gang member no more”, it felt he had bid farewell to gang status for good only to be heard saying a moment later:

So the way I see it is that I’m always gonna be in a gang. It might not be,
I’m not saying a gang as running around killing people, shooting people but in a gang as we get money. It might not be in a gentleman way, but it’s a way that everyone can eat, everyone can survive at it.

The contradictions in Karim’s interview may suggest that he was striving to show himself on the whole in a positive light both in front of myself as his interviewer and any potential reader of this piece of research. It is also likely that some of the most disturbing facets of Karim’s behaviour were either completely skipped over in his narrative or at least smoothed out by him as otherwise they would have compromised the sense of his evolving narrative and maybe the sense of self. One reason why Karim’s narrative lacked more consistency with the self-values that he embraced as the most important may be that he was simply not able to respond in a way that would have matched his orientation to them. This in turn was likely because of the reality of his personal and environmental circumstances, which were markedly conducive to violent and anti-social behaviour. Karim had a vision of himself as a more positive individual: a “caring father” and an “ex-gang member” but the immediate environment had possibly restricted the communication of these values.

Although fathers’ accounts mostly painted a picture of fatherhood as enabling the fathers to see their past actions and the future from a different perspective, and playing an exceptional role in desistance process, fatherhood was by no means a miraculous panacea for all life problems. Certainly, it shook fathers’ hierarchies of priorities hitherto important to them and the life was no more about what it had used to be about. However, taking a holistic approach, we will see that the overall picture is not as clear-cut as we would like it to be and the life choices made once having become fathers did not always necessarily match initial hopes and aspirations. Even if fatherhood had initially served as a trigger of positive change, there was no guarantee that one would be able to maintain desistance efforts, which was well reflected by e.g. Trevor and George. They had a very much up-and-down journey to reach the point where they were at the time of the interview. There is no doubt that becoming a father carries a great potential that may give way to turning one’s life around but it seems that it is a very individual matter how well each of these young men can act upon it and this is definitely not an overnight process. As Abbott (1997, p.89) very poignantly observed “what makes a turning point a turning point rather than a minor ripple is the passage of sufficient time ‘on the new course’ such that it becomes clear that direction has indeed been changed.”
5.4 Summary

What all fathers in this study shared in common was that they had all been in a gang for a substantially long period of time, in general, more than five years (George had spent four years as a gang member). That translated into them not managing to acquire enough educational qualifications or work experience, which eventually became an impediment at the stage when they started to seek legitimate employment.

For every young man, fatherhood brought about imminent behavioural changes. However, the onset of these changes and their trajectory differed between the fathers. For George and Trevor, some changes occurred with first-time fatherhood and then, second time fatherhood followed quickly, which led to the resumption of gang-related behavioural patterns. Others – Jake and Jason – gave up their gang status after they had got the news of the oncoming fatherhood. Karim’s case showed that one should never mistake disengagement from gang status for continued desistance from offending because these are two conceptually different entities. He gave up his status in a gang but was to continue his involvement in drug dealing and robberies for financial gain. Last but not least, for Tyrelle, Aaron and Sheldon there was no direct, causal link between becoming a father and gang disengagement. Tyrelle became disillusioned with fraternal life when nobody from his “crew” ever visited him during his prison sentence, Aaron owed his understanding of a father’s role to finding God whereas Sheldon considered his prison sentence (during which his daughter was born) a wake-up call.

Even though young fathers’ narratives were a rich source of evidence of behavioural changes occurring since the moment they learnt they would become fathers, transformations within core self did not always keep up the same pace. Once again, however, there were also some considerable differences between the fathers. For instance, they displayed varied levels of engagement in meaning-making and agentic processes. The narratives of Sheldon, Trevor and Jake were especially illustrative of both reinventing oneself in continuity with and learning from past experiences as well as of having a pro-active approach towards the future. They all appeared to take ownership of their lives and were not giving excuses for past wrongdoings. They actively acted on the opportunities that becoming a father afforded them, that is, they did not enter a new role passively but were using a new experience as a springboard to self-development and achieving something constructive. They were, often for the first time, devising future-directed strategies that were not only centered on them but revolving around their children. They
were not only seeking existing opportunities but were also keen on creating their own. Certainly, those ongoing transformations in their core selves were facilitated by: perseverance and resilience, change of neighbourhood, support from relevant youth organisations and engagement in generative pursuits. On the other hand, a narrative of e.g. Jason did not really reveal a reflective approach towards the past, building a bridge between “then” and “now”, and working out achievable goals. Rather than being an “active doer”, Jason appeared to react one way or another to whatever was happening to him. Last but not least, Karim came across as a highly agentic individual on multiple occasions in his narrative. However, the issue here was that a lot of his pro-activity and self-drive revolved around providing material security for his son and his plans of gaining legitimate employment were constantly being hampered. Agency was therefore there but so far there had not been any positive resolution.

Taking a holistic perspective, we may infer that once having got the news about forthcoming fatherhood, most fathers started to re-evaluate their existing gang status. Very often, because of their own personal histories of having absent fathers as children, they became concerned and apprehensive of the costs they would most likely have to incur if they decided on maintaining their role in a gang. They were aware that carrying on the same pathway, they would end up replicating what they considered as “their own fathers’ mistakes” and miss out on the life of their children. Fatherhood made most of them see things from a different angle and reshuffle the priorities, and eventually notice a value in a conventional life. In hindsight, all fathers seemed to appreciate the chance that fatherhood had given them. There were differences regarding at which point fathers actually took up their fatherly roles with full responsibility but overall, they were all proud of themselves as fathers. Moreover, most narratives (e.g. George, Sheldon, Trevor) gave tangible evidence of young fathers’ pro-active endeavours and taking positive ownership of the future. Initially dreaded (apart from Tyrelle) early fatherhood was eventually considered as a saviour that gave the life the meaning.

The next chapter will offer a portrayal of the journey through parenthood but from mothers’ perspectives.
Chapter Six: Motherhood changes everything?

This chapter will examine narrative data from interviews with seven mothers in order to give a portrayal of how motherhood at an early age may have served as a journey to personal transformation. Looking at disengagement from a gang and the shifts in mothers’ core selves following reconstruction of self-identity, I have suggested that, like in fathers’ case, both illustrated positive adaptation to the demands brought about by motherhood. Most interviewed mothers had been making a continuous effort to renegotiate their uneasy past at the same time attempting to secure a superior future for themselves and their children. My analysis was informed by two key questions. First, how did the mothers develop their self-understanding over time with regard to behavioural and identity changes? Second, did both always co-occur? My findings have suggested that all mothers who demonstrated transformations in self-defining values also manifested changes at the outer, that is, at behavioural level. However, an apparent behavioural change could emerge independently – it was not always underlain by changes in a core self.

I begin by discussing how mothers reacted to the news of oncoming motherhood – whether or not they embraced it. Then, I explore whether any changes in routine activities occurred after the birth of a child and whether pregnancy and early motherhood were accompanied by the renegotiation of mothers’ understanding of feminity. This is followed by the theme of disengagement – how mothers severed the ties with a former gang: by gradually detaching themselves or abruptly knifing the ties off? With regard to the theme of behavioural changes, all mothers provided evidence illustrative of change following the experience of becoming a mother; only the timing of this change differed between the females. At the level of core self, most mothers demonstrated the renegotiation of their self-understanding and past self-values, put that in context of the present and shared their concepts of the future aspirations and apprehension for oneself and the children. Last but not least, I look at the extent to which that internal reform was accompanied by the engagement in “paying back” and in symbolic generativity. What emerges as a result is a rich depiction of the potential for change that motherhood affords young women in gangs.

6.1 Reaction to the news of the oncoming motherhood

When Jessica became pregnant for the first time, she was 19, but this pregnancy ended in a
miscarriage. It came unexpectedly and, as Jessica highlighted, she neither grieved nor spent time reflecting on what had happened; she was quickly back to the same “old stuff”:

I didn’t even grieve. I was back on the road within two days after the release from hospital. I was just doing what I had to do in order to skip by and just not think about what had happened.

She latter admitted to me that before I asked her what she had felt at that time, she had never really sat down herself to think about what effect this had on her. It seems very likely that the suppression of the thoughts about miscarriage could have been a coping mechanism for Jessica, thanks to which she was able to keep her composure. At that time, she was very self-conscious of her role within a gang – she was behind the scenes concocting action plans. She felt she was not in a position to allow herself to display emotions; she had to conceal them in order not to jeopardise the stability of the group.

Three years after her miscarriage, at the age of 22, Jessica got pregnant again and this time it was a planned pregnancy. Asked about how she took pregnancy news then, she responded in a way that depicted her as being quite emotionally detached from the experience:

I didn’t really think in terms “oh, I’m pregnant and I’m gonna have a baby.”
It was just “ok, I’m pregnant then.”

This is a very rational response and the reason for it may have been twofold. Her previous experience of miscarriage might have implicitly and to some extent led Jessica to avoid building up that emotional connection straight away. Also, her partner was in prison during most of the pregnancy so she had to be very clinical about what she was investing her time and energy in. On the other hand, another participant, Kalisha split with her boyfriend soon after she found out she was pregnant. Recalling those moments Kalisha said:

We broke up when I told him I was pregnant. When I found out I was pregnant, I was scared, really scared. My son was an accident. I mean I love him but he was an accident. I didn’t plan to have any kids until the age I’m now.

At that time, Kalisha was living in a hostel – she moved out from home as herself and her mother had not been able to get along. This changed to some extent during pregnancy when Kalisha’s mother gave her assistance but overall she had to fend for herself both during pregnancy and after childbirth. She could not rely on her partner in any way as he was regularly in and out of prison (he was also in prison at the time of our interview). Having a very unsettled personal situation and no source of legitimate income other than
state benefits, it is understandable that Kalisha was both petrified and very anxious about what the future was holding for her. However, this was not only the fear that she would not be capable of looking adequately after her son. Kalisha was also worried that the child would become a barrier between her and people she considered as her friends – that she would transform into a lonely, miserable, stay-at-home mother:

I actually cried a lot thinking that because I had got pregnant, I’ll have no friends no more.

However, after the birth of her son, this worry faded away as Kalisha became pro-active in building a pro-social circle of friends among mothers from mothers’ groups and her son’s playgroups. As surprising as the pregnancy news was for Kalisha, for Jasmine, the circumstances were authentically very dramatic. With a chronically ill mother, an absent father and living in fear – Jasmine barely survived after having been shot by a rival gang – she tried to commit suicide by taking an overdose of sleeping pills. She was found by one of her friends who took her to hospital where she first learnt that she was pregnant. When asked how she had reacted to that news, Jasmine responded:

The doctor said that he had some great news for me and told me I was going to have a baby. I didn’t find that great news at all! There was a lot of fear, anxiety how carrying a kid was going to be like. I didn’t know whether to keep it or terminate it. It wasn’t a happy time at all.

She talked about her confusion and turmoil of different thoughts but, in the end, decided to keep the baby. Nonetheless, even after having made that decision, Jasmine remained unsettled and described her pregnancy as a struggle. First of all, the relationship with her daughter’s father quickly deteriorated eventually becoming very violent. When pregnant and after the birth of her daughter, she could not count on him and was forced to rely on her mother. However, the support from her mother posed its own problems. Jasmine had been drawn into gang life in the first place to avoid a toxic situation at home; since she turned five, she had to look after her mother who had a bipolar disorder and she had to cope with a rigorous discipline and changing stepfathers. Then, the roles changed and she was forced to ask her mother for help. Yet, the fact that Jasmine’s mother was the only person she could rely on with regard to child-care put her in a somewhat powerless position, which can be seen in a quote below:

I also tried a few jobs when my mum was well and she was babysitting. In my heart I didn’t want her to babysit but I had no other options.

Last but not least, Jasmine was battling an internal conflict between reason and a
subconscious desire to be out on the streets:

On many occasions when I was pregnant I had that inner voice telling me “Go out and make money” but my brain would say “it doesn’t make sense.”

I used to feel hindered, restricted, I was angry at myself because I’d put myself in that situation and now I couldn’t go and do what I wanted.

In the quote above, Jasmine emerged as frustrated and angry at the situation she found herself in. Like Kalisha, she found it very difficult to cope with limited freedom imposed on her by pregnancy. She felt becoming a mother forced her to change but she did not embrace that revolution wholeheartedly. However, what eventually resolved Jasmine’s internal conflict and made her life of trouble be gradually replaced by a conventional every-day routine was the fact that she was not handling pregnancy very well physically. She felt physically incapable to be out on the street as shown below:

I had such severe morning sickness that I could barely go to the shops let alone go out, hang around with my friends and continue my role in the gang. […] It’d be ridiculous to run around with a gun and a big belly.

Apart from physical limitations, the quote above also portrays Jasmine as very self-conscious about her image in others’ eyes. She had to make a choice – fulfilling the motherly role and keeping a gang status intact were mutually exclusive. If Jasmine had been out and about when visibly pregnant, she would have lost her credibility as a mother and, at the same time, she would not have been capable of carrying on with the same-degree of gang involvement, so her status of a gang-girl also would have suffered.

Similarly to Jasmine, Desiree went through a comparable confusion at the beginning of the pregnancy. It took her by surprise; she also considered the possibility of abortion and she could not either rely on her mother’s support as she was in prison for murder:

I always had a strong opinion about abortion. “I would never do that” kind of thing. However, being in that position I actually felt that I wanted to have an abortion. I was scared but I decided to have my child. […] My mum has been in prison since I got pregnant so she wasn’t there for my pregnancy and the birth. And when you are pregnant, you really need your mother.

However, in the end, she decided to have her child and, retrospectively, she was grateful that she had made that decision. She admitted:

Now, my son is 5-years-old. I’m so glad that I decided to have him. Have I not made that decision, God knows where I’d have been.
Comparably to Jasmine, Desiree was not either handling pregnancy very well physically and she would not have been able to maintain a consistent gang status at least because of physical limitations:

When I got pregnant, physically I wasn’t able to go out and do same things as before.

When viewed from the perspective of the accounts above, it does seem that, at least for some mothers, pregnancy and motherhood were likely to promote somewhat consequential behavioural changes. Physical changes such as a burgeoning “baby bump” and morning sickness made further engagement in gang activity simply more difficult. Relatedly, expectations that a society has towards mothers with regard to what they should be or should not be doing may have to some extent influenced females’ decisions about their further engagement in antisocial activities. Last but not least, taking on the new social role such as that of a mother may affect the behaviour simply because the amount of time that could be afforded to be out and about committing crime is substantially reduced because of responsibilities and limitations implied by this new role (Laub and Sampson, 2001). This brings us to the next section – how routine activities alter following the birth of a child.

6.2 After the birth of a child

6.2.1 Routine activities

Before the birth of their children, the mothers had been able to “hang out” on the streets unlimitedly or even leave home completely (e.g. Kalisha, Desiree, Noreen). However, once they had become mothers, they found themselves housebound because of new responsibilities and adapting to that change in several cases proved to be either very challenging (e.g. Jasmine, Trish) or even impossible to achieve (Noreen). Every young parent needs an effective network of support to be able to balance all responsibilities. Building/ re-building relationships with people who will provide emotional support (immediate family) or accessing practical help (young parents’ groups) serve as a shield in critical situations and help sustain desistance efforts. This is a theory but it is not as straightforward in practice. We cannot forget that one of the reasons mothers joined a gang in the first place had been the quest for “independence” or in other words running away from household problems (usually violence and substance abuse). Then, by becoming mothers at a very young age, interviewed females found themselves in the situation where they needed to rely on support of those they had previously sought refuge from. It was yet
more important because none of them could be assured of the financial provision from children’s fathers on a permanent basis. Regardless of what the living arrangements were, most mothers benefited from help (financial or child-care) from their own mothers, which was especially invaluable for those females who were actively trying to return to education or to find employment (e.g. Kalisha, Sheila). Other than that, the childcare burden fell almost entirely on young mothers. Consequently, the time spent on the street had to be replaced with the time spent with children; with well-organised daily routines, mothers were more likely to stay away from any risky and anti-social activities (Osgood et al., 1996) engaging themselves in a set of new home and child-centred duties, and opportunities. In several narratives, mothers talked about spending less and less time outside home with their friends and former gang peers, and that loss of teenage freedom appeared to be the most tangible feature of transition to motherhood. Kalisha affirmed how unhappy she was at the beginning having to change her daily routine:

It felt that my freedom was taken away because I couldn’t do things I’d used to do. I know that it sounds bad but at the beginning I saw my son as a problem because I had to stay in the house, couldn’t just go out and do whatever. I didn’t want to be housebound.

It appeared that Kalisha saw childcare duties as a duly obligation, which would make her “miss out” on life. She longed for her freedom and carefree days. The similar picture emerged from Trish’s narrative. She did not realise she was pregnant until she was in her eighth month which gave her virtually no time to prepare herself for the transition into a new role. Initially, she was not coping very well with all the perceived freedom being taken away as seen below:

The first few weeks when I had him at home, I didn’t know how to cope. I was used to coming back home at whatever time, sleeping whole day after. You can’t do that when you have a little baby. There were moments that I wanted to run away.

However, with passing time and also due to the parenting classes, which Trish started to attend supported by her keyworker, she somehow embraced the change declaring:

But after a while I got used to being a mum and with time it somehow gets easier.

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10 Trish and Desiree spoke about the bond between their former partners and their children but even then, the support was naturally limited because fathers were non-residential.

11 For instance, Jessica lived independently (in her own council flat); Trish lived with her son and her foster family, and Kalisha moved back from the hostel to live with her mother.
Likewise, when Noreen’s daughter was born, Noreen saw all child-care duties as unpleasant, as a chore. She wanted to be out with her gang, she did not want any of motherly responsibilities to diminish the freedom she had been used to. She professed:

I knew I had responsibilities but all this feeding, dressing, taking care of her was like a chore. I know it sounds horrible but that’s how I felt then. [...] I’d leave her on her own in the house and would come back after a few hours. I wanted to be on the road and hang out with people.

There was no real change in Noreen’s daily routine and she carried on that way until she got arrested for robbery when her daughter was 4-years-old; and sentenced to three and half years in prison. Throughout the years she spent in prison, Noreen’s mother was the primary carer for her little daughter. That turned out to be the stepping-stone for Noreen and her own mother to rebuild their relationship, which until then had been both infrequent and strained.

I have referred to Kalisha, Trish and Noreen, as they provided the most explicit accounts of how difficult it had been for them to handle that shift into a new daily plan. Other mothers spoke however in a similar tone; there was an unanimous consensus that whatever idea of motherhood one had had beforehand, that was usually redefined after the birth of a child. Some, like Noreen, took much longer to adapt than others but eventually they all did.

6.2.2 Feminity

Another change that accompanied that retreat from the street to the domestic sphere of the home was a shift between masculinised feminity and conventional feminity. Several women highlighted that pregnancy time and motherhood had given them a chance to rediscover their feminine side, which had remained deeply hidden whilst in a gang. As Sheila poignantly recounted:

When I was pregnant, it was the first time, apart from when I got my first period, when I actually felt like A GIRL. And I’m glad I have a daughter because she let me find my feminine side and that was something I was so not in contact with. Me acting like a girl, oh, c’mon, please!

The fact that some of these young women, notably Sheila and Desiree, started to overtly

12 The fact that I wrote “A GIRL” using capital letters is to mark how Sheila accentuated it with her voice in the interview. It was not about becoming more feminine within already existing feminity; Sheila meant a strikingly different image to that people had seen of her before.
demonstrate their feminity also served as a clear, visual message to others that one no longer identified herself with a gang. The transformation occurring within one’s core self is not visible as such whereas any external changes become immediately noticeable and announce to others that one’s social role has changed. This was well portrayed in the fragment from Desiree’s narrative:

People see me now and can’t believe what they see. I’ve never dressed like this; I had a tracksuit and trainers and a baseball cap. Make-up?! No way! I’d never wear make-up! I was a proper tomboy.

A similar message also came across in Sheila’s narrative:

From the person I was to the person I’m today, I’d never wear a skirt and top like this. I’d wear a tracksuit and trainers. I was like a “mambie”, a girl that behaves like a man.

Both Desiree and Sheila seemed to have built a masculine identity for themselves by concealing their feminine side and getting predominantly involved in what they found to be a genuine “masculine identity.” If we took their words in literal terms, we would look at them as simply one of the boys. However, their behaviour may have been in reality situation-driven i.e. they behaved in a way that exactly matched the context they were in rather than wholly adapting a masculine identity. Likely, at least to some extent, adapting a “tomboy” identity may have served to minimise the chance of sexual victimisation. On this note, I therefore agree with Messerschmidt (2002) that it is worth making a distinction between a so-called “bad-girl feminity” on the one hand, when gang girls’ bad behaviour is circumstances-specific i.e. they act like one of the boys but at the same time they retain their feminine identity and, on the other hand, taking on a lasting masculine identity. It cannot be more firmly established which one was actually the case for Desiree and Sheila unless we explored more meticulously their concrete criminal behaviours and the subjective perception of those behaviours’ significance. Even though the masculine conduct seemed to be an element of their gender identity, the quotes above are not enough to take for granted that they had genuinely adopted a masculine identity.

Based on the findings discussed so far, it can be stated that pregnancy and the actual birth of a child are very likely first, to stimulate the change in routine activities and second, to trigger the shift within the realms of feminity. These changes in turn are seen to promote disengagement from a gang, discussed in greater detail in the following section.
6.3 Disengagement from a gang

Several mothers’ narratives revealed that children used to be perceived as “saviours”. For instance, Jasmine made a direct link between becoming a mother and her life being saved from a random death on the street:

My daughter saved me. If I didn’t have my children, I’d have either been dead by now or serving a very long sentence in prison. I know that and everyone around me knows that. So, my older daughter saved me. If I hadn’t got pregnant with her, I wouldn’t be sitting here and talking to you now. As simple as that; that is the truth.

Jasmine’s narrative also suggested that some fairly immediate behavioural changes might have just resulted from physical changes brought about by the new social role. In fact, in her words, her involvement with other gang members receded because “she was of no use”. Spending time at home, she was away from the people and situational factors that could have otherwise triggered “old” patterns of behaviour:

People stopped visiting me because I was of no use to them any more. Because I was at home so much, I wasn’t in trouble and my life became normal. Getting pregnant was the way out.

At the same time however, Jasmine admitted that, to this day, she was intentionally avoiding places where she might come across her former gang peers. She did not seem to have enough self-confidence with regard to what she might possibly do finding herself in the circumstances imprinted in her memory as the ones associated with her gang membership:

I’m not going to say that if I was put into a right situation, it wouldn’t revert me back to my old ways because once you’ve got that mind-set or anger in you, although I stay away from it, it could take just one thing to bring it all back and make me lash out. So my motto is: prevention is better than cure so I keep away from certain people; I stay clear from confrontation. I try to avoid people from my past. It’s because of fear but not fear for my life but fear for what they could bring back out in me.

It does seem that Jasmine was consciously not tempting fate – she displayed a coping mechanism by avoiding dealing with a stressor. The fact that she admitted being fearful of the effect, which the presence of “her friends” could have had on her, implies that deep within she remained vulnerable. She had not yet successfully built that resilience to face
challenges that could jeopardise what looked like a fragile balance.\textsuperscript{13}

Sheila, similarly to Jasmine, also highlighted on several occasions how difficult it was to leave a gang but she displayed a strikingly different approach throughout. In the excerpt below, she made it clear that once she had made a name for herself and became known, she had to constantly defend that “big name” and “fame”. Otherwise, she would have lost credibility and, in the eyes of others, she would not have lifted to her title. In other words, not “stepping up the game” is seen as a failure and weakness; and nobody wants to be seen as a loser. Sheila recounted:

It’s like when you establish yourself as this big, bad person, it’s just hard to walk away. It’s like boxing – if you step onto that ring and fight for that world title, if you don’t defend it when the next person wants to fight you, the majority of people will say that you’re rubbish.

Sheila admitted that before her daughter was born, she had lived along that principle, she had been very conscious of her gang-member-self and she would have stuck to it no matter what, just to have respect in other gang members’ eyes. The birth of her daughter made her realise that she did not want any longer act in a way that would please everyone around her, that she had a right to say “no” and make decisions in agreement with herself. It therefore seems that in a way Sheila acquired her independence by proxy. Also, importantly, she highlighted that making a decision that she would keep the baby meant that there could only be one way forward which was to leave a gang. Albeit tough, she highlighted that it was possible with a right mind-set. She was adamant that once the decision had been made, she had to be consistent about it and that change of lifestyle was in that case not a matter of choice but rather a duty she had towards her daughter. In her narrative, she came across as a very persistent individual in making that happen:

As soon as I’ve found out that I’ll have a baby I dropped so many friends, well, the people I thought were my friends. I dropped them and I had to focus on going to work. I didn’t want to be a statistic more than I already was and I didn’t want my daughter to be born a statistic.

The quote above carries two important messages. First, it portrays Sheila as a very self-aware person – conscious of how herself and others in the situation analogical to hers are seen by the society. She wanted to make sure that her daughter would be far away from that zone. She changed her phone number and although she did not move out from the area

\textsuperscript{13} By “resilience” I mean resourcefulness in coping with obstacles rather than the immunity to adversities.
until a short while ago, she had disappeared from the street. When asked if she was still in touch with any of the people from her past, she said she had not got back in touch with anybody but surrounded herself only with “positive people” including parents from her daughter’s playgroups. Second, one can infer that Sheila had the sense of responsibility for her daughter. It may stem from the fact that Sheila’s narrative hinted that her daughter was not totally discrete from her self but rather constituted an addition to it, was part of her self (Furman, 1996). Whatever decision Sheila made, her daughter’s wellbeing was her prime focus. Sheila had been successful in disengaging herself from a gang but she admitted that it had been a very challenging mission to accomplish:

Even though I’ve changed that much, there will still be people trying to draw you back so that they can say that you’re still the same person. But I’ve learnt to keep myself away from negativity and my main focus is my daughter.

It seems in fact that Sheila did not even consider this mission as entirely accomplished because at every step of the way she had to battle against those aiming to prove that she had not changed after all. Even if for much of the interview Sheila depicted her decision to disengage as swift and pursued without being challenged by any one, it becomes apparent in extracts such as the one above that the process had been far more complex and challenging than her story at first implied. Staying clear of likely risk factors did not come naturally but followed a conscious learning process.

The nature of a process, as requiring at the start a conscious cognitive effort and critical decision-making, seemed to be also echoed in Desiree’s narrative. Once she learnt she had got pregnant, she stopped going out with the rest of the gang so the literal i.e. behavioural disengagement was quickly observable. However, she did mention that sometimes she would think about the financial benefits of gang involvement but she would just not act upon those thoughts. What it means is that the emotional and cognitive disengagement did not necessarily, at least initially, comply with the pace of behavioural disengagement:

For me being pregnant was like an easy way out from the gang. For guys it’s a lot more difficult. Even if they have a child, they don’t carry it so they are not physically limited by pregnancy. Obviously, I stopped getting involved in drugs and crime and stuff but sometimes I’d sit down and have a thought of committing crime for money really but I tried not to endorse any of these thoughts. […] When I sometimes see people I used to associate with, we just say “hi, you’re all right?” That’s it. No number exchange, nothing. They don’t need my number, for what? I don’t need them any more.
The quote above carries two more important messages. First, Desiree was aware that parenthood as an exit strategy was, at least in principle, likely to be more prevalent amongst females than males because only females have a physical experience of pregnancy. Last but not least, Desiree did not speak about any lingering ties with former gang peers. She was not in touch with anybody from “those times” and if coincidentally coming across such person, she would not try to rebuild any type of connection.

On the other hand, Trish and Jessica held quite a different spot on the spectrum. Although they disengaged from a gang at a very different pace, they both maintained a certain number of lingering ties. Trish depicted her disengagement from a gang as if it had happened overnight rather than as a more usual drifting-away process; her gang exit appeared as something very straightforward and abrupt. When she became pregnant, she was 17 and still in a foster family herself. She knew she had to make this decision because otherwise her son would have been taken into care. She found support in her brother who was a senior member of the same gang and he did play a major role that no one would attempt to contact his pregnant sister. Trish’s account portrays gang exit as something easily achievable i.e. if you wish to leave, you simply leave. Asked about her next step after having found out she was pregnant, Trish replied:

As soon as I found out I was pregnant, I was gone from the road. My twin brother was in the same gang and I told him straight that I’m not doing this no more and he supported it. Because of him, I never had to look behind my back scared that I’m gonna get hurt. I told him the gang is not for me no more and I just left.

Trish did not experience any retaliation for her decision and over time got back in touch with some of her former gang peers, but she highlighted that it was in a non-street context (e.g. when partying out together). However, it is still worth noting that Trish clearly emphasised that the fact she did not have to worry about the aftermath of her decision was to do with her brother. This suggests that if it had not been for his support, things might have taken a different turn. It does not necessarily mean that Trish would have not disengaged in a different scenario but the fear component would have likely been there. Similarly to Trish, Jessica kept some lingering ties with former gang peers. These persisting ties also seemed to be symbolic – Jessica highlighted that they had acquired a different, non-street context, but still the fact that they remained led to role ambiguity. She admitted:

I’m still in contact with a few of the people I used to hang around with
either because they have grown up like me or they’re still in contact with my baby father but the difference is that I don’t do things with them no more.

When Jessica got pregnant for the second time at the age of 22, she had already started drifting away from the people she associated herself with – she changed the phone number and moved out of the area. These decisions were motivated by the fact that Jessica had been attacked in a previous home and that gave her a reality check about her safety. Gradually, she started to lose contact with many people as most of them were either in prison or had died one way or the other. Jessica did not consider those ties that remained to be in any way hazardous to her continued desistance. This is very interesting as it shows that a same kind of qualitative shift seen with the men may be occurring at least for some females. Rather than knifing off completely all the relationships with former gang associates, some of them persist albeit in a redefined context.

Last but not least, Noreen’s account revealed a yet different picture. Neither during pregnancy nor after the birth of her daughter did Noreen limit her involvement with gang peers. She did not want her daughter to interfere in any way with what she considered at the time as the sense of her life – freedom from rules and being out with people she perceived as friends. She admitted:

I remember when once I left my daughter with my mum for a few weeks and then I got back home like nothing had happened. Then, I got my own place and took her with me but I was like “ok, whatever”. I’d leave her on her own in the house and would come back after a few hours. I wanted to be on the road and hang out with people. My friends loved her so with time she somehow became one of us. I’d often have my daughter with me.

Noreen would therefore often take her daughter out when she was on the street with her gang, something that, at a different occasion during the interview, she retrospectively condemned as selfish and reckless. Her lack of disengagement from the gang seemed to be facilitated by the fact that for a very long time she looked at her motherhood in purely biological terms, she did not develop an emotional bond with the child, which would counteract the bond with the gang. She said she had kept the same status and the extent of gang involvement during the entire three years between the childbirth and when she was given a prison sentence. It was in prison when Noreen for the first time understood the real meaning of parenthood. She listened to other inmates talking about their children and motherly love, and she was strongly affected by the fact that a lot of them were sending the money they had earned doing prison jobs home to their children. That was when she
decided she would not be going back on the street and upon the release she did not; neither did she reinstate the contact with anybody from the gang.

As much as for Noreen prison played a mediating role, for Kalisha an analogical role was played by her partner’s imprisonment. She admitted that she had been out on the street when pregnant until her sixth month. It was then when she realised that if the child’s father had been the one still persisting in the life of gang crime, she was the one who had to change. She admitted that it became just about her and her son and she did not keep any ties with the former gang; as she did not have the means to move to a different neighbourhood, she wanted to make a clear statement to others that she was past that phase of her life. And the only way to do that was to be consistent about distancing herself away from the people she had earlier associated with. It does seem that Kalisha was consciously seeking certification in the eyes of local community that she was no longer “that type of girl.” She mentioned that the only people she talked to those days were her mother and the parents of other children from her son’s playgroups and nursery, and she felt relieved and content with that. In hindsight, she became very aware of the role that her son had played in her disengagement from a gang and she believed he had also saved her life:

Honestly, now, I’m happy that I have my son. I don’t know where I’d have been otherwise. I think I’d have ended up in prison because I’d been going a very wrong route.

The above-presented excerpts from mothers’ accounts demonstrate that when analysing the issue of disengagement from a gang, we must always keep two issues in mind. First, at which point the process started? In the great majority of cases, it is a process that takes a considerable amount of time rather than an overnight event. Second, whether, after having made a decision to disengage and having started to be pro-active about it, one still keeps lingering ties with anybody from that gang? What mothers in this study seemed to share in common was the conviction that pregnancy had served them as a convenient pretext to find a practical exit strategy from a gang but there was no homogeneity, no uniform pattern to which at least the majority would have complied with regard to the characteristics of the disengagement process. Likewise, what the next section will demonstrate, there was a considerable variation in the pattern of identity and behavioural changes occurring after the females had become mothers.
6.4 Identity and behavioural change

Even if often mothers wanted to give an impression that their transformation had been sudden and that behavioural and identity changes had occurred virtually overnight, detailed analysis made it clear that the change was gradual, took time and was much more complex than they would have initially suggested. Jessica is here a good example as, when she got pregnant, she stopped going on the street but she took up money frauds instead:

When I was pregnant, I’m not gonna lie, I was doing money frauds but as mad as it sounds, to me, that’s not really an involvement in anything.

We see that Jessica denies the harmfulness of her behaviour and when I followed that up, she maintained that after what she had done and seen in younger years, it was difficult for her to think of crime when she could not see the harm being done to the other with her own eyes. This way of thinking appeared to be echoed when she talked about her behaviour in the context of her daughter:

The way I’ve set it in my head is that I’m her mum and as long as she doesn’t see me committing crime, it’s kind of all right.

This fragment of Jessica’s narrative provides a good example of internal self-justification when, by saying “it’s kind of all right”, Jessica trivialised the negative consequences of her behaviour. It is worth referring here to Maruna and Copes (2005) who stated that ex-offenders or ex-gang members for that matter use neutralisation strategies to reshape the negative fragments of their pasts so they are in harmony with a non-offending self. These include, for instance, denying responsibility and diminishing harm caused to victims, all seen in the case of Jessica. Making excuses possibly serves to reduce the cognitive dissonance (enables an individual to maintain a positive sense of self) but also affords a buffer from externally imposed stigma. I also find it thought-provoking that Jessica, rather than talking about positive and active aspects of motherhood (that is, things she was doing with her daughter in mind), focused more on the passive side (not ending in prison, not being seen committing crime), well seen for instance when she was saying “The way I see it is, as long as I’m not in prison and I’m with her, she can’t say that I’ve let her down.” Building on that, she did not seem to use positive framing when constructing her role as a mother and did set herself low expectations. I believe there may be a strong link between such a stand and the fact that she did not embrace motherhood as a unique trigger of her change. When asked where she thought she would have been if it had not been for her daughter, Jessica referred to “maturation”. She said:
To be honest I don’t think I really changed because I had a baby. I think the baby was part of it, but myself, I just got older. That’s what it is. I think change comes with age. I just grew up.

Bearing in mind that Jessica’s pregnancy had been planned, it appears that it was more about the growing up process, which led to motherhood and subsequent attitude, and behaviour changes rather than, inversely, becoming a mother triggering the maturation process. This implies that for Jessica parenthood was more of a mediating factor (“baby was part of it”), rather than a direct trigger of any changes that occurred. Being apprehensive of the costs of one’s behaviour for one’s children also came up on several occasions as the driving force behind change. One of the reasons why Jessica transformed her behaviour was her fear about being locked up in prison similarly to her daughter’s father and her daughter being left without her parents. As the extract below hints, the costs of being either a victim or a perpetrator are likely to grow substantially and to be less bearable when a woman becomes a mother:

It’s like, I get scared now. Before, I didn’t know what fear was, I never got scared; if I was going to be shot, I was going to be shot; if I was going to be stabbed, I was going to be stabbed. I didn’t fear nothing. Now, I get scared. It’s not about me any more. If I do anything wrong, she’s gonna be left on her own.

Reaching this awareness of the possible outcomes of one’s behaviour seems to denote a significant move from a self-centred to an other-centred approach – encapsulated by “It’s not about me any more.”

Likewise, in Noreen’s narrative, there was no evidence that would account for a direct link between motherhood experience and a change process. For her, the time spent in prison served as a preliminary catalyst to make a life change. In fact, prison had a mediating effect between parenthood and behavioural, and identity changes:

If I hadn’t been sent to prison, I would have never put my life together. In prison for the first time I understood what it means to be a parent. Before, I was completely irresponsible as a parent.

Comparing this attitude with the attitude Noreen had had when pregnant and after her daughter was born, a substantial change is noticeable. She showed a great deal of self-awareness reflecting upon the past and was able to admit that her behaviour had been wrong. The essence is that Noreen was not trying to find excuses for her behaviour. What specifically played a main role was a relationship that Noreen built with other older,
female prisoner who befriended her. Noreen admitted that it was her first “real” relationship with other person in her life – open, honest and supportive. Noreen became like a daughter to the other prisoner and that made her look at the relationship with her own daughter from a different angle. Noreen said:

When I left prison, I wanted to prove to my daughter that I can be a good parent. I owed her that. I have a duty of care.

Noreen had been living with a lot of guilt for a long time but in the end managed to put that behind and to build a deep relationship with her daughter. When I asked her what it felt like to be a mother, she said above all:

For a very long time, I carried a lot of guilt and it’s only been the last couple of years that we’ve had that real close relationship. It’s a very hard job to be a mother but also very rewarding.

Noreen re-discovered herself, re-directed her self in a way that a past identity gave way to a new positive identity in which Noreen happily took on motherhood responsibilities:

Now, I embrace being a parent. I enjoy being a parent.

Also, Noreen’s narrative portrayed her as a woman who was very much focused on the future; she was not ruminating over her past. She seemed to have a good insight into the self, knowing what she wanted to achieve and get out of life. Maruna (2001) said that “successful desisters had a plan and were optimistic that they could make it work.” It does look that Noreen fitted into this pattern. When I asked her what she felt upon her release from prison, she responded:

When I came out, I just wanted to achieve success and be happy. I had a plan. I made a plan when I was inside. I was adamant that I would not put myself in such situation ever again. So, I had a plan and motivation to change.

Noreen had the willingness and motivation to keep up the good work. Her account of agency also implied her understanding of how different social circumstances might affect it. This is well seen in the following extract:

Nobody said that the life is going to be easy and things happen that may be beyond your control but it’s how you deal with these things that matters. […] I’m surprised myself that I’ve come through all the challenges and in all honesty, life is a continuous struggle.

She was aware of the number of obstacles she would be likely to face because of her past
history but the essence of her narrative was how she would respond to those and Noreen became resilient, and pro-active in finding viable solutions. Noreen was not avoiding challenging situations and was actively engaged in moving herself, and her daughter in the direction of a positive future. Her narrative manifested resilience on both levels – external and internal. She had returned to education after her release from prison, she had broken contact with former gang peers and she did have a full-time employment. She was profoundly introspective and one can see how over time she started to construct a life story that would have a different meaning. She was aware of the change that had taken place within her and she established a narrative that pointed towards redemption. Noreen exhibited remarkable strengths allowing her to successfully sustain her desistance.

Likewise, for Desiree, the redemptive makeup of her narrative was likely in itself an essential driving force behind maintaining existing and making new changes in her life. As she was striving to give meaning to her past through the prism of her current pro-active endeavours and redemption, her actions were more and more in concordance with her redemptive narrative (Hauser, Allen, and Golden, 2006). The on-going life story thus guided and provided scaffolding for self-development (Singer and Blagov, 2004). One of the changes that motherhood brought for Desiree was her growing self-awareness and the sense of responsibility for her actions. After the birth of her son, she was battling post-natal depression but she “put herself together to make sure her son has a good life”; she did not allow herself to think that she might ever let her son down. She knew that her son was looking up to her and was very self-conscious of her picture in his eyes. This conviction that she had to “deliver” as a mother appeared to be grounded in Desiree’s experience with her own mother. She was very strict and distant towards Desiree and her sister, and by the time Desiree turned 12, she had developed a serious alcohol problem. Then, just before Desiree learnt about pregnancy, her mother had been sentenced for manslaughter and was in prison since then. Desiree used the mother-directed judgemental language and wished to ensure that herself, she would be “the best parent ever.” She went to college and although she dropped out because of stress, she did find a job instead. Once her son turned 3, she went back to college and at the time of the interview was a full-time student at the university. She was actively working on providing a better future for herself and her son. She remained focused and was making conscious decisions, all well pictured in the fragment below:

I could go and get a retail job but career-wise that’s not gonna help me or my son. That’s why I decided to go to the university. My son relies on me
so I can’t be a failure. I can’t just sit down and cry because I have someone looking at me. Of course, I have my stressful times but having my son I can handle stress much better.

She learnt that she needed to be consistent and to follow the principles she preached to her son. When I asked her about the most important lesson that motherhood had hitherto given her, Desiree replied:

If my son starts seeing me doing wrong things, he will obviously think that’s the way to carry himself. Even such things like a phone conversation and stuff, when you say a swear word, you can’t really do that around your child because they pick up on things. So, obviously, having him made me change in general, change everything. I’ve just sat back and seen the world from a new angle to be honest.

The change that occurred within Desiree went far beyond the superficial behavioural change. It was a profound change at the level of the core self. Desiree did not use empty slogans, her words found reflection in her actions. Bauer, McAdams and Pals (2008) made an association between the ability to make a meaning of one’s life-story account and a subjective understanding of oneself as “happy”, and the feeling of prosperity. Also, Lilgendahl and McAdams (2011) referred to positive processing and differentiated processing. The former implies by and large pulling out the positivities from personal experiences whereas the latter relates to self-assessing how negative experiences had built an individual as a person. They are both positively correlated with a current level of content and openness. Desiree was actively engaged in making a meaning of her past. Although she acknowledged that this was not something one could be proud of, at the same time, she believed it had made her who she eventually became. She was content with the life she had so far managed to build for herself and her son. Also, Desiree’s self-portrayal was that of a highly resilient female and decisions she was making in life embodied a great deal of agency. When overcoming challenges, she seemed to have been able to find “silver lining” believing that because of what she had gone through, she would be better able to protect her son against getting caught up in the same cycle. When I asked her whether she would have changed anything if she had a chance to relive those years, she responded:

I’m very glad that I lived that life because now, growing a little boy, I know very well how it is out there. I’m a lot more aware than many other mums. I know that my life was disgusting but I’ve come out on the other side.

Likewise, Sheila’s narrative painted a picture of deep transformation in her core self that occurred over time. Sheila portrayed herself as carefree before her daughter was born, self-centred and not really thinking about long-term consequences of her actions either for her
or her family:

I was so bad as a person before I had my daughter. I’d have never thought what would happen if I died. I lived life. I had fun. I didn’t care. But the first thing that came to my head when I gave birth was “who is going to look after this baby if I die?”

However, motherhood was for her a life lesson and a profound learning experience, and made Sheila entirely rework her identity. First, motherhood made Sheila re-evaluate her priorities in life, which in turn led to realisations about costs and benefits of the continued gang involvement. Sheila admitted:

Being a mum for me has been the best life lesson. I’ve learnt so much from being a mum. Having my baby made me take a step back and see what is important. Having nice trainers is not all that important. Since I’ve had her the most important thing for me is to own my own home so that my daughter has something that is hers.

Sheila became conscious that, as a mother, there was more at stake and she was very adamant she did not want to let her daughter down. She strived to be a positive role model for her even at the cost of doing things she did not feel, at least at the beginning, very comfortable with but that were benefiting the child:

I’ve always been trying to have a positive influence on her. Even, 1 o’clock children clubs, that was so out of my comfort zone. But when you have a baby, it’s not about you, it’s about what is best for the baby. And going to a 1 o’clock club, whether you like it or not, is good for a baby. Having my baby forced me to go out of my comfort zone.

Sheila was clearly making an effort to adapt to new circumstances in an active way. She worked to lift up to the expectations of that new social role. She did not want to be seen as a mother just because she had given birth to her daughter, but she aimed to prove that she could be a very good and involved mother. When I asked her how she would describe herself, she said “Being the best mum is my number one job now.” Sheila defined herself through motherhood. One can have multiple identities depending on the relational context, for Sheila the most important one was that of a mother. Second, Sheila did not try to rationalise her past actions; she did acknowledge that they had been wrong. She always used strong singular “I” rather than “we”, which would diffuse the blame. Neither did she refer to any “it” as an external locus of control. When asked how her gang-centred perspective changed after childbirth, Sheila responded:

Before, I was trying to condone certain things that I was doing but there is
really no explanation, no excuse for some of the things that I was doing. When you do bad things to people and you don’t show remorse or try to repair that, bad things will come onto you as much as you’re trying not to.

This extract is also illustrative of a cognitive bias otherwise known as a Lerner’s (1965) just-world hypothesis. It assumes that any actions by the individual are naturally oriented to generate for him/ her morally relevant consequences. Righteous behaviour is ultimately acknowledged and, as emphasised by Sheila, for any malevolence one has to pay hereafter. She was the only person who by herself mentioned “remorse” and “repair”, and spoke about her attempts to make up for the wrong things she had done. She told me about one occasion when her daughter had been in a playgroup and the other two children had not been playing with her. It turned out that Sheila and her gang had bullied their mothers in the past. It was a real shock that the consequences of something from a long time ago did not rebound onto her but had a lagged effect on her daughter. Sheila said that she had expressed her remorse and the two mothers had been willing to accept it, which made her feel better. This seems to be reflected by Braithwaite and Mugford (1994) who wrote about restoration; if you try to make up for your past wrongdoings, even in a modest way relatively to what you had done, you resume an other- and self-respecting identity. As Sheila’s narrative implied, this is however a personal choice whether or not one decides to see through the lessons learnt in life. It was conspicuous on several occasions in the interview that she did so herself, one of the examples being the following:

Being able to sit down and analyse all these things I had seen, I can take positives out of them but I can also see how dramatically negative they were.

Last but not least, Sheila highlighted the role of her family in her change process and spoke about how thankful she was for the support her family had offered her. She recounted:

I always felt lucky that I had a mum and siblings who didn’t give up on me. They saw me doing so many stupid things and they still supported me and they helped me get back up. I know, that is the thing that made it easier for me to make the transition from that life to the life I’m now living.

Studying Sheila’s narrative, it became clear that this was not by any means a completely new identity that she had built for herself but that there was continuity. All the past negativities were reinterpreted and given a meaning so they could find their place in the present framework, an adjusted version of the former self. Similarly to Desiree, Sheila also managed to find “silver lining”; she was in a way grateful for her negative experiences and she managed to see positivities in them, the main of which was meeting her partner – the
father of her daughter.

Kalisha’s narrative also exemplified the continuity of the identity change; the change process took time and although it appeared that Kalisha had been aware of the need of change from the beginning, her initial actions did not correspond with that. She wanted something more for her son, something different from what she had used to have herself, but it was not until the external factor came into play when she actively acted upon that “willingness”. When Kalisha was six months pregnant, her partner found himself in prison. She admitted:

Obviously I knew I had to change and be a role model for my kid as I didn’t want him to end up in the same kind of lifestyle that I had. But I didn’t really do anything about it until it hit me hard when I was 6 months pregnant that I’ll be a mother. That’s when my son’s dad went to prison again. I realised I had to fix up things quickly for the sake of my son because I’ll be pretty much the only person he can depend on.

This implies that her partner’s incarceration served as a wake-up call for Kalisha, it opened up her eyes to what might happen if she carried on with her life as she knew it. From that point, Kalisha started to change. Kalisha’s narrative also included references to “maturation” and “growing up”. It does not seem though that these were emotionally loaded; they were portrayed quite neutrally – neither positive nor negative, simply happening to be an integral component in the process of transition to motherhood. Kalisha stressed how she had “grown up” becoming a mother and, inversely, how her partner had yet not managed to embrace the analogical process:

We’re not kids no more, do you understand what I mean? When you have a child, you have to grow up. I’m not saying that such things are acceptable when you’re a teenager but when you’re young, you tend to do dumb things. But when you’re a dad, you should understand that you can’t do those things no more. And he doesn’t understand that.

Since becoming a mother, Kalisha graduated from college and drifted away from people she had used to associate herself with. Despite multiple attempts, she was not however yet able to secure stable employment but she was adamant that she did not want to rely on benefits. She believed she was doing well as a mother to her son. However, at the same time, Kalisha’s narrative did not suggest a strong sense of agency. In fact, she did not seem to be very reflective with regard to her past. Her narrative demonstrated that her son had motivated her transformation but there was no evidence that would suggest the role of intrinsic motivation – she seemed to have changed for and because of her son but not really
for her own sake. For instance, by saying:

My son is my little motivator. I want him to be proud of me and I don’t want him to have a mommy living of benefits,

Kalisha clearly highlighted the role of her son in her change process. At the same time, she seemed to look at all her positive decisions mainly through his eyes; focused more on external behaviour and material needs than on what she herself desired and hoped for in life. It seems to be the case that she was in the environment that did not either require or push her to do so. As for instance Habermas and Bluck (2000) pointed out, certain strengths including cognitive skills and intrinsic motivations relevant to engagement in meaning-making of one’s life history still develop when one becomes a young adult. However, Kalisha was already a 25-year-old woman when I interviewed her. Although this does not inevitably mean that she would not ever be able to become an active agent with regard to making a sense of and giving a meaning to her life narrative but was still a worrying sign nonetheless and it was not certain whether at one point she would become more pro-active and driven by internal motivations.

On the other hand, Jasmine’s narrative suggests that her change was behavioural rather than a deep change including reworking her attitudes towards life and her core self. In her case, desistance process did not loom to be either very agentic or purposeful. Jasmine seemed to react to situations that were happening to her rather than to be driven by intrinsic motivation, which was embodied in the following words:

I just went with the flow and saw the birth of my daughter as a God’s way out.

“Going with the flow” simply implies passivity and not exerting much influence on the course of events. This was further reinforced when Jasmine said:

I don’t plan for next week, I take every day as it comes.

Jasmine thus portrayed herself as a person living from day to day, was not making plans for the future and there was no evidence that she ever reflected on how her current moves were impacting on the future of her and her daughters. She had not as of yet made attempts to return to education or to get a skill that could offer her a chance of finding permanent employment. She secured a full-time job once over the years but found it difficult to adjust to its demands and resigned:
Being told at work what to do, being dictated, I wasn’t used to that. So I didn’t really like the work environment. It was a shock for me being told what to do. I felt I had no life.

In the fragment below, Jasmine implied that she could not be sure what she would do if she found herself in the circumstances that had used to trigger her behaviour in the past:

I’m not going to say that if I was put into a right situation, it wouldn’t revert me back to my old ways because once you’ve got that mind-set or anger in you, although I stay away from it, it could take just one thing to bring it all back and make me lash out.

Due to the fact that Jasmine was still living in the environment evocative of prompts for the behaviours, which were being forsaken, there was a persistent conflict between entrenched gang scripts and scripts for conformity. It does seem that Jasmine was intentionally sticking to the “conformity script” and making an effort to stay away from situations and people who could potentially make her return to her “old ways”. We do not see her developing a strategy of resilience or being proactive about choosing methods to support the conformity script. What this implies is that successful maintenance of desistance in her case was, at least at the time of the interview, due to the triumph of will power rather than due to the profound transformation of her identity. Last but not least, lacking resilience and pro-activity, it was very likely for Jasmine to have a sensation of being locked in an unsatisfactory conformist arrangement; maintained primarily for the sake of avoiding a return to the street where her life had been at risk, rather than for the fact that her experience of motherhood was intrinsically rewarding (Giordano et al., 2002).

6.4.1 Generativity

In the context of the identity change, I also looked for any evidence of engagement in generative pursuits, as it was the case for males. Studies with female desisters seem to produce on average more evidence of generativity than those with male desisters. Barry (2007) demonstrated that, amongst females, desistance was an outcome rather than a trigger of their commitment to family and work whilst men, on the opposite, were desisting first and then getting ready for prospective roles in these areas. Echoing Maruna (2001), she focused a lot on a process of “social recognition” occurring, in her view, when an “ex” individual accessed social capital and sought an opportunity to offload it into a generative pursuit. Usually, engagement in generative actions is related to middle adulthood and, consequently, may be more prevalent for older people/ longer-established desisters (Healy,
This seemed to be the case in the current sample, where the two mothers who expressed most involvement in generative pursuits were at the same time the two eldest females (Jasmine was 33 and Noreen was 37). At the time of the interview, Jasmine did not have a stable job but worked freelance as a youth outreach worker. Her narrative resonated with a desire to give people something useful, to share her life wisdom for the benefit of the others. Although Jasmine never openly expressed regret or shame for her past actions and was rather heard saying “I’m not proud of things I did” or “I hated the misery I was bringing people”, her narrative implied that she felt she had wasted a big part of her life. And she was using those experiences to tell a cautionary story to those who were either in the same or at risk of ending up in the same vicious circle she had once been in:

Because of what I went through, when I speak to youths to discourage them from wrong doings, I speak from the heart, nothing scripted. I honestly think that is the reason why I connect with them. I can relate to the youth, what I say resonates with them and I can help them to turn their life around. If one female can refrain from being in a gang after talking to me then my job’s done. And it’s therapeutical for me as well. This is my release.

By telling her story, Jasmine seemed to have found a meaning for that part of her life. The benefits were twofold – she was making a lasting contribution to the society and, at the same time, telling the story was for her a cleansing process; she could symbolically distance herself from the past. This corresponds with what Irwin (1980, p.94) said about the reconstruction of the past – desisting individual can “unabashedly and proudly” reveal his/her past rather than having to keep running away from it. From what Jasmine said about her experience, one can infer that this work was building up her awareness of interpersonal competence, gave her a sense of meaning as well as reinforced her self-esteem and a sense of achievement (e.g., Aresti, Eatough, and Brooks-Gordon, 2010; Maruna, 2001). On the whole, the chance of sharing personal experiences in order to help others is associated with one’s better psychological health and that simply “one does well by doing good” (Piliavin, 2003, p.227). Bearing in mind that Jasmine had not yet succeeded at securing other legitimate employment, it is important that she discovered that field in which she would achieve and feel good at.

Interestingly, in the case of Noreen, her profound engagement in generative work commenced when her own daughter started to go in her footsteps while at secondary school. In her case therefore, the atonement was directed first at the daughter and then spread to her daughter’s friends:
In secondary school, my daughter found herself get caught up in quite a lot of confrontations who were emotionally threatening her, if you like and she started hanging around with wrong people. She became gang-associated. She’d bring her friends around. They would come over and I would try and have a conversation with them and try to help them with their issues. We started to do workshops within the home, if you like. That’s how it started. So, for the last 10 years I’ve been a youth engagement practitioner.

On a different occasion, Noreen highlighted that, just after release from prison, she carried a lot of guilt and shame for her past actions and those workshops she started with young people gave her a chance to come to terms with her past and move on. Both Jasmine and Noreen also contemplated what they could have achieved in their lives if it had not been for the choice to join a gang years back. It feels that the biggest debt they had was a debt to themselves. Probably, this is the reason why rescuing even just one other person from committing a same mistake seemed to be enough to afford a sense of redemption. When viewed from this perspective, most mothers’ accounts implied that they had perceived themselves as, in a way, the victims of society. They had found themselves in a gang seeking the sense of power and channelling their anger, and frustration with their domestic situation. However, that seemed to quickly become a trap in itself. The birth of a child then afforded a way out and served as an empowering tool to achieve things females had always “meant to do”.

6.5 Summary

On the whole, the analysis has demonstrated that motherhood is likely to build a context facilitating positive behavioural and identity changes, which echoes previous research (e.g., Leadbeater and Way, 2001; Rolfe, 2008). All the narratives gave evidence supportive of behavioural change following the experience of becoming a mother. Mothers’ active engagement in gang activities was brought to a halt but the timing of this change differed amongst the females. Some of them including Trish, Jasmine, Sheila and Desiree stopped going out on the street and getting involved in illegal activities altogether once they learnt they were pregnant. For Kalisha and Noreen, there was some other factor present, which mediated the link between their motherhood and the decision to put gang life behind. For Kalisha, that was the incarceration of her son’s father when she was pregnant, which served as a wake-up call and for Noreen, her three-year prison sentence, which made her absent from her daughter’s life between when she was two and five. Last but not least, Jessica, when pregnant, exchanged active gang involvement for money frauds and only completely stopped that when her daughter was two, and her daughter’s father found
himself in prison again.

While narratives of all interviewed mothers offered powerful illustrations of behavioural changes rooted in early motherhood, they did not by themselves necessarily result straight into self-transformation. All mothers in this study had at least one thing in common, that is, they all were members of a gang and this experience by itself has limited to a bigger or lesser extent their chances of pursuing the long-term goals that they would consider the most meaningful (e.g. securing stable employment). They differed however in, for instance, how they engaged in the reflective processes; the rich evidence of these was especially prevalent in the narratives of Noreen, Sheila and Desiree. These three narratives were also the richest with regard to portraying profound changes occurring in the area of core self. They were marked by presence of meaning-making processes and all three females were highly agentic individuals – they were pro-active in tackling challenges and future-oriented. They held themselves accountable for the decisions and actions they had decided to take (stressing an internal locus of control, e.g., Rotter, 1990). They were focused on “active doing” and the future outcomes of their actions; on setting up a set of goals and devising a plan how to achieve them. They were consciously seeking opportunities that would help them make the life better for themselves and their children. Changes in core self were prompted and reinforced by external factors including: recognition of possible lifestyle alternatives brought about by motherhood, environmental change and support from pro-social others. In contrast, other narratives, including that of Trish and Jasmine, pointed towards a fair dearth of insight into the past, lacked both relating that to the present and making pro-active decisions about the future. They seemed to belong to the “reactive” group – acted in response to the events that happened but otherwise remained fairly passive. As Maruna highlighted (2001), those who do not succeed in desistance appear to be short of the intrinsic feeling of self-efficacy and hope more than they lack shame. Likely, this is the reason why those apt at caring for themselves and confident of one’s own self-efficacy (e.g. Desiree, Sheila) were more successful than others (e.g. Jessica, Noreen in the initial stage) in their sustainable internal change. Overall, having a target which one aims towards and perceives as achievable, resilience and being open to receiving support all play a role in enhancing desistance. At the end of the day, some mothers (mostly Trish and Jasmine) will have to become more pro-active in developing and reinforcing the identity of a “good mother”, and a “former gang member” if they wish to keep up the effect of changes they have made to this day (e.g. returning to education).
Looking across the narratives, it can be said that the experience of being a gang member gradually became an aversive one for most mothers, which reinforces the idea that becoming a mother may serve as an accessible opportunity for changing the life trajectory (e.g., Leadbeater and Way, 2001; Rolfe, 2008). Consequently, mothers who had up to that time embraced living their live on a “highway” and the sense of freedom, and money benefits acquired through their street life, became far more apprehensive of the risks associated with maintenance of that kind of life. The risks related to the costs of that lifestyle to the individual in question as well as to the child, the further family and the wider community (Giordano et al., 2002). This change in how mothers affectively perceived their gang involvement was reinforced by a reappraisal of the meaning of conventional life (Brunelle, Cousineau, and Brouchu, 2002). In hindsight, none of the mothers regretted having a child. Despite the fact that all pregnancies but one (Jessica’s) were unplanned and the very challenging situations being pregnant put them in, mothers portrayed “keeping the baby” as a conscious decision. The narratives were indicative of that, with time, mothers had adapted to the new social role and that, in the end, most of them considered themselves as “doing a good job.” Also, most narratives were the proof that these women had the ability to re-invent themselves and used motherhood as a means to reach self-development. Most mothers considered, what had earlier been seen as a catastrophe, to eventually be a “gift from God”, which saved them from destroying their life or even from death.

Continuing from this careful consideration of mothers’ experiences of parenthood in the context of gang membership, Chapter Seven offers a candid comparative evaluation of how they differ from and/ or overlap with those of fathers.
Chapter Seven: Comparative analysis

The past two chapters provided a portrayal of parenthood experience separately for mothers and fathers. This chapter will directly compare and contrast the findings highlighting the key commonalities as well as the differences.

7.1 Timing of change

One of the crucial comparisons that should be made between young mothers and young fathers is with regard to the timing of change, that is, when exactly an individual made a decision to pursue desistance efforts. The analysis revealed a very complex and non-homogenous picture across participants. Based on the analysis, I managed to distinguish three main patterns. For some parents, the change process was triggered by the news that one would become a parent. This took place for Desiree, Sheila, Trish, Jasmine, Jason and Jake. Similarly, Trevor and George decided to change when learning about oncoming fatherhood but for Trevor this was not until he was to become a father for the 2nd time and for George, for the 3rd time. The second observable pattern emphasised the role of some additional factor that mediated the transition. This included, for instance, other parent of a child being in prison (Kalisha), finding God (Aaron) or being in prison at the time of a child being born (Sheldon). This pattern was also represented by Jessica, Noreen and Tyrelle. Finally, Karim embodied a third distinct pattern. He considered himself to be an “ex” gang-member, the change that he had attributed to his son, but that appeared to give way to his involvement in drug dealing and robberies for financial gain.

When viewed from this perspective, mothers could be seen to fall in one of the two groups. They either wholeheartedly attributed their transformation to the fact that they had become mothers or, still highlighting the importance of their children, pinpointed that there was some additional factor present that mediated the change. In the former group, Jasmine merits special attention as, compared to other three mothers, her narrative did not reflect much intrinsic motivation for change. Her change was triggered by the physical limitations implied by pregnancy rather than by the subjective experience of motherhood per se. We can only hypothesise what the trajectory of the change process would have been like for Jasmine is she had handled pregnancy well physically. With regard to young fathers, five of them were adamant that the experience of fatherhood had saved their lives. However,
according to the narratives, only Jason and Jake pursued with the change straight after they had learnt that they would become fathers. They pictured themselves as determined in their endeavours and, though appreciating that they had been struggling at times for different reasons (lack of employment, problems with the other parent), neither mentioned any incident that could have stopped their desistance efforts. On the other hand, for instance, Trevor and George maintained that desire and motivation to change for their children had been right there from the onset but they were not positively acted upon until after the second or a third child was born. Last but not least, Karim was a parent where we were able to most clearly observe that disengagement from the gang status and desistance from crime are separate entities.

7.2 Concept of parenthood

One of the themes that also emerged from young parents’ narratives was how they understood their role as parents, that is, what they found to be the most important “parental duties” which they should assume. Overall, the great majority of parents in this sample displayed an earnest intent to fulfill their roles to the best of their ability. I found more similarities between the two groups that I had initially expected. The top priority, even for the fathers who were typically considered as main breadwinners, was providing their children with emotional support, affection, “always being there for them” and secure upbringing that most of these parents had lacked themselves as children. There were fathers like Karim who also put strong emphasis on financial and material support for their children (not so much for children’s mothers) but this was generally less prevalent as compared to the affective components of a parental role. As much as there were similarities in what parents believed their role should entail, the language used to convey that message differed for mothers and fathers. Fathers were much more likely to use sentimental and idealised language compared to the more practical language of the mothers.

Another thing young parents had in common was that almost all of them admitted to feeling very ambivalent and confused after they had found out they would become parents. The only exception was Tyrelle who planned the pregnancy with his partner. The extent of this uncertainty and, in some cases, even fear differed however for mothers and fathers. Mothers feared how they would physically handle pregnancy, did not know what to expect before and after their child was to be born. Similar fears did not pertain to fathers for two
main reasons. First, developing pregnancy is for a mother a constant reminder that she
does not uniquely have any more a status of a gang girl but now she has got into an
additional social role. Second, only Tyrelle witnessed every stage of his partner’s
pregnancy, he could internalise the new role from the very beginning. The remaining seven
fathers were not there on a permanent basis. Their presence was either irregular (e.g. Jake,
Karim), they were in prison for the majority of the pregnancy time (e.g. Jason, Sheldon,
Trevor) or did not know about pregnancy for some time (e.g. Aaron). Nonetheless, for
most fathers and mothers, initial ambivalence to parenthood transformed over time into a
great feeling and a deep sense of mission they had to accomplish.

7.3 Routine Activities

Additionally, what should be mentioned is how the change in routine activities differed for
mothers and fathers. Several mothers, notably Kalisha, Jasmine and Trish spoke about how
their routines changed once they learnt they were pregnant. Interestingly, it was difficult to
find evidence for intrinsic motivation that would have driven that change; in the
foreground, there were several triggers. Each and every one of them was external and
predominantly revolved around the absence of a child’s father and physical limitations
resulting from pregnancy. The new life role was highly difficult to accept at the beginning
and mothers wished they had not put themselves so early in the position where they had to
change so much about their life structure. Nonetheless, they adjusted over time. On the
other end of the spectrum was Noreen who did not change her routines in any way after
finding about her pregnancy and it was not until her daughter was six years old, and
Noreen left prison, when she became adamant that she needed to change. A different
picture emerges if we look at interviewed fathers. All fathers, apart from Tyrelle who lived
permanently with the mother of his child, were non-resident, lived by themselves and saw
their children with varied frequency. The tone of most narratives implied that their life
came to be more ordered after they had become fathers but at the same time none of the
fathers explicitly pointed out that he actually did change his everyday routines to
accommodate his role of a father. When I asked fathers about what they were doing with
their children when they were seeing them, their responses revolved around “playgrounds”,
“fun”, “walks” and so on. The typical, time-consuming activities specific of childcare were
virtually absent from that talk. The only father who mentioned that was Karim. He wanted
to be actively involved in childcare duties because he was aware that it was to be too
exhausting for a child’s mother if she was to do everything by herself. However, at the
time of the interview last year, Karim was an expecting father so I do not know how these plans worked out in reality.

Altogether, bearing in mind the context in which fathers spent time with their children, it does not seem to be very surprising that their routines did not undergo the change similar to that of mothers. Related to that is also the fact that several mothers, notably Kalisha, Trish and Noreen, spoke about that deep sensation of lost freedom that followed the birth of a child and Desiree also spoke about her post-natal depression. They felt constrained against their will (none of the children were planned) and wished they had been more sensible not to put themselves in that position. Although, with the wisdom of hindsight, each and every mother was appreciative of motherhood, they had been far from thinking that way at the beginning when motherhood had been a source of anger and frustration. Interestingly, similar references to “lost freedom” were absent from young fathers’ narratives. I reckon it is because they were not living with their children and saw them when they wanted so they felt in control of the situation. They were in a position where they would consciously choose the extent of their involvement with children, which was not the case for mothers. There is more social agreement on what it means to be a “mother” so mothers have to be very self-aware fulfilling their roles.

As it could also be seen in several cases (e.g. Jessica, Desiree, Jake), residential change played an important role in restructuring routine activities in several different ways and eventually weakening the ties with former gang peers. Desiree, for instance, moved to an area of a far smaller socio-economic disadvantage as compared to the one she had lived in when in a gang. This made taking up structured pro-social activities more likely and indeed she found employment and was also admitted to the University. This by no means indicates that there were no criminal opportunities in the new area once she moved there, but the mere fact of moving is likely to imply that the access to these opportunities is disrupted, at least temporarily. Such a disruption may be sufficient for an ex-gang member to think twice before getting involved in any criminal activity in the new area; separation from a previous environment naturally carries an opportunity for an individual to change his/ her behavioural patterns (Kirk, 2009). In fact, the self-help philosophy lying behind programmes including Alcoholics Anonymous puts emphasis on the need to avoid the environment and people linked to the problem of abuse if an individual aims to maintain his/ her abstinence (Maruna and Roy, 2007). We can easily imagine that many of the former gang-members will be struggling to maintain their “ex- status” simply because of a
very low chance of moving out from the area that had provided them with criminal opportunities (Travis, 2005). This was especially visible in the case of Karim, who after having spent five years in prison returned to the very same area. He had no means to relocate and because of proximity to people he had associated himself with, they saw him in the neighbourhood and he felt they wanted him to go back in. An alternative set of daily routines and a change of structure must be therefore in place. Last but not least, both Giordano et al. (2002) and Maruna (2001) agree that a residential change is a contributing factor in the process of the identity change with the former (p.1000) pinpointing that “the environment can thus provide a kind of scaffolding that makes possible the construction of significant life changes.”

7.4 Behavioural change

While, for both mothers and fathers, I have gathered a lot of evidence depicting behavioural changes as originating from young parenthood, this did not always necessarily imply deep changes at the core level of a self. When viewed from this perspective, becoming a parent undoubtedly has a massive transformative potential affording an individual a chance to rework the self but is better seen as a prompt to which everyone has a subjective response. We cannot look at this experience as a stand-alone event that wipes away the past and determinates the future; we need a context.

Desistance is a dynamic process and there is always some likelihood that with changing contextual factors, its maintenance could be jeopardised. After having studied the narratives of young parents, I did see that each person had displayed certain behavioural changes. The picture was however far from homogenous. The narrative that was especially marked with multiple inconsistencies was the one of Karim who, on the one hand, self-reported as an “ex-gang member” but, at the same time, still had an extensive network of lingering ties with the gang. In his view, he had disengaged from a gang status yet remained heavily involved in crime for the sake of financial gain. Also, Jasmine and Trish, although their narratives gave details about the ongoing change, this change still seemed superficial and, even more so, very controlled rather than internalised. They clearly highlighted that they consciously kept themselves away from certain people and places in order not to be lured back into “old” life.

When viewed from this perspective, there are key messages to be noted. First,
disengagement from a gang and desistance from criminal activity, although interleaved, still remain separate entities. Exiting a gang is usually accompanied by the decrease in criminal involvement as the number of criminal opportunities, both in terms of places and people available at hand, starts to decrease. However, if one had been a core gang member and, relatedly, has an extensive network of lingering ties, he/she may use these ties to commit further crime at the same time distancing him/herself from a gang. Second, some parents, including Jasmine and Trish, exhibited a rather passive approach to desistance, that is, it was more about avoiding negativity rather than pursuing positivity. These are clear-cut examples of learned helplessness. Neither Trish nor Jasmine got to believe that they had any control over the situation when they had to face a challenge. Rather than adapting a stand to proactively seek solutions to tackle adversities, they did prefer to avoid adversities altogether. This was in contrast to “active” desisters including, for instance, George, Sheldon, Noreen and Desiree who displayed flexible behavioural patterns and better adaptability. Unlike Trish or Jasmine, these parents did not show conscious avoidance behaviours but displayed internal locus of control.

7.5 Identity change and Agency

The narrative approach to development outlines the course of identity growth as revolving around building links between one’s past and present, and future self (e.g., McAdams, 1993). This means that an individual constructs a meaningful context for the past actions in order to be able to work out the sense of self over time. This study has been a novelty in desistance research to date as it exposed one’s emergent competence for meaning-making of one’s past actions relatively to the beliefs or goals. This way one is able to build a consistent, redemptive narrative and to set up behaviour blueprints which are compatible with it. There seem to be substantial differences in psychological processes accompanying these changes: in identity transformation and personal self-development. Parenthood rather serves as a “triggering event” (Laub, Nagin, and Sampson, 1998) that offers a chance of building a positive self. Also Leadbeater and Way (2001) emphasised that “having a baby as a teenager can be a critical transforming event, but this even alone neither erases the tape of past experiences nor determines future ones” (p.4). In all cases, desistance was an on-going process and one should not ever take completely for granted that it is there to stay permanently; the key to success is the maintenance of it and, like with giving up anything else, there is always some risk of getting back to “old ways” (Maruna, 2001).
When viewed from this perspective, clearly, there were inter-individual differences on this external, observable level. These differences became yet more prominent when looking deeper towards the core of the self. It became apparent in the narratives that young parents substantially differed with regard to the level of engagement in reflective processes. Some parents including Noreen, Sheila, Sheldon, Aaron and Jake showed particular commitment to meaning-making processes and could all be described as highly agentic individuals. In contrast, other young parents including Trish, Jasmine and Jason were characterised with a virtually missing insight into the past and therefore did not show that awareness of the link between past and present, and how the current decisions may impact on one’s future in the long-term. As compared to the first group of “active doers” who were steering their transformation in a concrete direction, these parents could be rather seen as “reactive”. They would take some action after a given life event had taken place but, other than that, they would be seen as fairly passive. They showed neither confidence with their own self-efficacy nor had an action plan on how to improve their current circumstances. Neither did they seem to be fully in command of their own behaviour, which may be the reason why they purposefully avoided certain people and places.

All things considered, they would have to take more initiative in making steps that would reinforce their “parent identity.” Those parents who were apt at making meaning of past actions were also taking the future into their own hands and were resilient in the face of challenges potentially harmful to their continuous desistance. They recognised their children as a boost to their self-confidence. More than a half of parents stated that without their children, they would have either been dead by then or, in the best-case scenario, they would have been in prison; children gave them something to live for. Some parents, notably, Desiree, Trish and George also looked at their children as at good fortune – they felt they had got a chance to prove to themselves and to others that they were able to achieve positive things for themselves. They were actively seeking opportunities and persevering in their endeavours in order to secure a settled life for their children that would be so very different from what they had used to have themselves as children. For instance, four fathers (Aaron, Trevor, George and Sheldon) and three mothers (Desiree, Noreen and Kalisha) got back to education being very self-conscious about their image in their children’s eyes. They did not want their children to have a mother/ a father living on state money; they all wished to establish themselves as role models that their children would look up to. Despite the fact that Trish had also returned to education, I purposefully omitted her on this occasion, as at no point did she speak about how that positively
impacted on the future of her and her son, what chances it afforded her. On the other side, there were parents – Jessica, Jason and Karim who neither returned to education nor had a stable employment at the time of the interview. Both Jason and Karim were especially striving to secure a legitimate job but with no formal qualification and no vocational skills, this proved to be a mission yet impossible to accomplish. That made the former rely on state money and the latter carry on committing crime outside the gang in order to be able to deliver on a breadwinner role that he had set up for himself. Jessica did not express any immediate plans of either acquiring qualifications or searching for employment. She seemed to feel comfortable in a situation where she relied on state money and some support from her family.

7.6 Generativity

Involvement in generative pursuits develops after the individual has rebuilt his/her sense of identity and restored supportive bonds with others (McAdams and St Aubin, 1992). The behaviour can take a form of general concern with generativity, when an individual expresses and acts upon his/her positive desire to play a role in the lives of future generations and to care for them. Generativity can also be reflected in care and nurturing of one’s own children or expressed by one’s self-development leading to tangible outcomes. The narratives of Jasmine, Noreen, Jake and Aaron, all of whom Maruna (2001, p.102) would call “wounded healers”, gave the most explicit account of involvement in generative pursuits. They all looked upon their past actions and gang membership as the best training that had equipped them with assets in the eyes of young people they were working with. They felt that it was because of both their personal experiences and common features between them and the people they were supporting that they were able to liaise so well and get a response. The first three were working with gang-involved young people and the latter was working in a secure unit. Similarly, both Sheldon and Trevor were volunteering in programmes, where they themselves had got support; giving something back to the society feels to some extent like atonement for all wrongdoings. Most generative themes were nonetheless associated with children, with young parents (e.g. George, Sheila or Kalisha) recounting their desires to handle responsibility for their upbringing. All of the fathers’ narratives conveyed involvement in aspects of generativity, though not so much in the context of caregiving roles because only one father – Tyrelle – was to share caregiving responsibilities on a daily basis with his daughter’s mother. Generativity was mainly related to fathers’ roles as providers for the family.
7.7 Final notes

This exploratory piece of research has well illuminated the link between how the self-identity develops and gang-related behaviours change in a positive direction for parenting young men and women. With relation to the “past”, every parent, regardless of age and ethnicity, spoke about their involvement in a gang and was aware that he/she had belonged to what was seen by the community as a “gang.” However, the study participants were noticeably reluctant to disclose any closer details of what kind of illegal activities their gangs had been involved in. The likely reason behind this unwillingness may be that they had all become parents and, therefore, focusing on the negative aspects of the past rather than on how they turned their lives around may perpetuate this cycle, where an individual is not allowed to fully move on. Parents were unanimous that involvement in crime was not something to be proud of and conscious rumination over it was not productive and, even more so, potentially destructive to their self-image as responsible parents. The “present” constituted both self- as well as external certification that one had given up the gang status. It also entailed building up a positive relationship with significant others – in this study, the focus was specifically on building that relationship with one’s child. Perceiving this relationship as personally important and internalising it as a part of “present” stimulated behavioural and identity changes (e.g. building individual resilience). Consequently, an individual was ideally devising plans for the future, was hopeful to achieve certain goals and was accommodating towards the challenges. The success in these appeared to be strongly intertwined with one’s level of agency, support from pro-social others and perception of availability of a legitimate identity.

Continuing from this examination of parenthood experience from the comparative perspective, the final chapter – Chapter Eight – will provide a conclusion and offer the recommendations for a real-world application of the findings.
Chapter Eight: Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate in detail the relationship between becoming a parent and gang disengagement in a sample of inner-London males and females with a history of gang membership. Supposedly, this group is expected to use “parenthood” to their advantage by responding to the opportunity of change that this new life role affords. Participating parents not only had a history of gang membership spanning on average several years but also, in great majority, the history of past convictions. If one expects to demonstrate the relationship between parenthood and positive change, it was likely to take place in this sample as the complexity of young people’s lives meant that their behaviours had a potential to be considerably altered through parenthood.

Also, previous UK-based studies and the majority of US-based studies had investigated parenthood effect individually for each group and had therefore lacked a comparative approach (Hope et al., 2003; Kreager et al., 2010). This study provided an insight into how parenthood is likely to inhibit gang involvement for young females and males. The meaning of parenthood is expected to substantially differ for men at least because the definition of a “father” is less clear-cut and more open to interpretation than that of a “mother”. The resulting complexity makes the comparison with motherhood noteworthy. Being the first study that takes up a comparative perspective and conducted in the UK, it is thus a valuable contribution to the field of knowledge on gang desistance.

Finally, the understanding of “parenthood” was wider than it just being a one-off event of physically becoming a parent when a child was born. The study delved into different stages of parenthood, from the moment one learns about oncoming parenthood, through pregnancy to the life following childbirth and, if there were any, subsequent children being born. Additionally, the study recognised the importance of parenthood context – in particular, whether a parent lived together with a child and what the parental approach was like, that is, whether parenthood was embraced. This was necessary, as it had been expected that these might look differently for mothers and fathers and therefore result in different outcomes.

I will reiterate now the key messages and how they can be put in the literature context.
8.1 Gang desistance is a process

As much as the decision to leave the gang usually unfolds over time, the actual leaving is a developing and long-term process rather than an overnight event. The decision is influenced by the multitude of factors that push and pull at the ties that one has with his/her gang. Ultimately, an individual qualitatively redefines these ties and also gradually changes the approach towards gang activities; develops commitments and beliefs that are incompatible with those preached by the gang. With time passing, gang exit is finally clinched as the ties with fellow gang members have been severed or neutralised and one is involved in conventional activities. It is a challenging process, often laden with dips and hard knocks at least because a considerable amount of the ties to the gang do in fact reflect the relationships that had already existed before one made a decision to join the gang. The more time one spent in the gang, the more time it will take to establish positive behavioural patterns, make a cognitive shift, dissociate oneself emotionally from the complex past and take ownership of the future.

8.2 Behavioural Change

Another take-away message relates to the behavioural change that parents displayed after the birth of their children. As such, this event marked, for the majority, the start of the disengagement process but it kicked in at different stages for different people. With regard to some mothers, it took place after having received pregnancy news (e.g. Sheila, Desiree) and, therefore, an inference about pregnancy having a direct impact on disengagement can be made; for others (e.g. Kalisha), pregnancy effect was mediated by some other additional factor such as incarceration of the other parent. On the other hand, for fathers, a greater variety of behavioural patterns was revealed. One of the findings was that the association was observed between behavioural change and the number of children the father had. Where there was only a short space of time between the birth of a first and a second child, the positive changes that had occurred following the birth of a first child used to dissolve and the resumption of the old behavioural patterns was taking place (e.g. George, Trevor). Second, similarly to mothers, for some (e.g. Tyrelle, Sheldon), the effect of becoming a father was mediated by some additional factor frequently including disillusionment with gang-life. Third, from all the fathers’ accounts, it does appear that only Jake and Jason embarked on a transformation process straight after they had learnt they would become fathers. Finally, in case of one father, Karim, as much as he talked about disengagement
from a gang, he appeared to shift his involvement into gang-unrelated crime. Even though the way some earlier studies had portrayed the link between parenthood and behavioural change might suggest that the latter would occur somewhat automatically, this study suggested otherwise. Positive behavioural transformation does not happen overnight for most parents but does take time and usually entails a multitude of experiences based on which an individual grows self-awareness and becomes cognizant of his/her behavioural choices (e.g., Breen and McLean, 2010). The experience of parenthood also triggered the shifts in the parents’ hierarchies of priorities and values so the most salient were those, which best fitted the new, reinvented sense of self and the future self. Parents became apprehensive of the risks associated with maintenance of gang involvement. The risks related to the costs of that lifestyle to the individual in question as well as to the child, the further family and the wider community (Giordano et al., 2002). This was accompanied by a reappraisal of the meaning of conventional life (Brunelle et al., 2002), which in turn motivated the establishment of new behavioural patterns.

8.3 Identity Change

Last but not least, with regard to the identity change, identities are fluid constructs through which we give certain meanings to different aspects of our lives. People act in specific ways in different sets of circumstances but one identity may keep a more prominent position than others hence directing the individual’s behaviour in the majority of situations. It is for certain that identities evolve on a continuous basis and over one’s life-course different identities are likely to occupy the prominent position interchangeably (Polkinghorne, 2004). This study demonstrated that the occurrence of parenthood was likely to trigger such identity shifts. Rather than considering parenthood as in and of itself leading to the self-transformation, it is best envisaged as a “triggering event” (Laub et al., 1998), which affords a young person a chance for the development of resilience. As stated by Leadbeater and Way (2001), “having a baby as a teenager can be a critical transforming event, but this even alone neither erases the tape of past experiences nor determines future ones” (p.4). For the majority of interviewed young parents, parenthood initiated an inner conflict between a “gang member” identity and a “parent” identity, and the desistance from the former did not imply this identity’s decay. The more young parents’ behaviour was informed by the new identity, the more they were able to internalise it and the former, dominant identity of a gang member lost its significance and became latent but it did not entirely dissolve. Parenthood offered a new angle to the identity of interviewed gang
members. As much as acquiring the label of a “parent” opened for young males and females the door to the new world offering new prospects and incentives, it never led to a lasting change automatically and each person had to be an agent of his/ her own change. Some parents including for instance Trevor, Jake and Desiree became pro-active in their attempts to provide financial security for themselves and their children, became resilient and developed their sense of parental responsibility. However, even in those cases where an individual is highly agentic, this does not have to be a guarantee of success as the structural and resources-related obstacles restricting young parents’ capacity to wholeheartedly invest in a new identity are vast and pervasive. That was well seen, for instance, in the case of Karim who was well motivated to play an active role in his son’s upbringing and wished to be a role model for his son but at the same time was caught in the cycle of homelessness, unemployment and lingering ties to his former gang. Those factors put Karim at a consistent risk of, what Maruna (2001) had called, “falling off the wagon.” In the case of other young parents, structural obstacles were also present (including a child’s other parent being in prison, little family support), but the accumulation of risk factors for relapse was the most substantial in Karim’s case.

The findings showed that becoming a parent entailed changes not only to the individual’s social identity (self as a “parent”) but also changes to the beliefs and responsibilities that represent one’s personal identity. The majority of young parents in this study were consciously making a meaning of their past. Their life stories demonstrated how self-values and self-perceptions had changed from the past and provided scaffolding for the future that illustrated their appraisal of the aspirations and concerns (Singer and Blagov, 2004). It appeared that social and personal identities intersected and, most likely, were inseparable. To give an example, for young fathers as a whole, a substantial emphasis on being a provider for the family was likely to be related to the societal expectations implied by one’s role as a father. This may however also had an impact on one’s self-concept and self-appraisal.

**8.3.1 The content of the narrative identity**

The final message pertains to the two aspects of the narrative identity: meaning-making and agency, which are intertwined. While the former denotes the extent to which an individual experiences self-growth through engagement in a “critical life review”, the latter reflects both the degree to which an individual takes responsibility for his/ her past actions and what his/ her orientation towards the future is like (in terms of devising objectives,
putting a plan together how to achieve these and enacting the role) (Sales, Merrill, and Fivush, 2013). There were considerable differences amongst parents to what extent they were engaged in reflective processes. Some parents including Desiree, Sheila, Sheldon and Trevor provided accounts rich with a reflective approach towards the past, in which they built a bridge between “then” and “now”. They made the past life fall into place, gave it a sense and subsequently built up “redemption scripts” (Maruna, 2001). Other parents’ (e.g. Jasmine, Trish, Jason) accounts offered no such insight. For the latter group of parents, this “not-delving into the past” mechanism may have served as a coping function in a sense that they would have lost coherence in their narrative if they had gone too much into the details of their life prior to parenthood. That would have likely jeopardised their self-concept of “responsible parents” (McLean and Mansfield, 2011; Sales et al., 2013). At the same time however, persistent lack of self-reflection may be detrimental when attempting to afford a wholesome base for their own children (e.g., Bowlby, 1969).

Likewise, there were considerable differences in the expression of agency by interviewed parents. Some were “active doers” – devising sets of goals and consciously creating opportunities for themselves to deliver on these. When facing obstacles, they were not giving up but pro-actively seeking solutions to tackle them and using a new experience as a springboard to self-development and achieving something constructive. They took ownership of their decisions and were future-oriented. This was generally facilitated by: perseverance and resilience, change of neighbourhood, support from relevant youth organisations and engagement in generative pursuits. Those parents on the other end of agency spectrum appeared to be passive or otherwise reactive – responding to occurring events rather than creating opportunities. They showed less perseverance in the face of obstacles and appeared to have an external locus of control. They were also characterised with greater prevalence of short-term rather than long-term thinking – living there and then and not demonstrating much future orientation. The dimension of agency in their case lacked the “projective” feature, which would allow them to “construct changing images of where they think they are going, where they want to go, and how they can get there from where they are at present” (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p.984).

Summing up, the findings of this study demonstrated that for parenting young males and females with a history of gang membership, behavioural change was certainly related to the process of change in one’s sense of personal and social identity. First, changes occurred in the hierarchy of priorities, that is, individuals shifted their focus after they had
balanced profits and losses likely to result from the life change and that was translated into behavioural changes. Second and relatedly, structural transformations occurred – finding legitimate employment, getting back to education. All of the above influenced parents’ motivation to actively reflect on how they perceived their current and possible selves. To build and then maintain the integrity of a new identity, the new experiences had to fit with one’s present concept of the self. As a result of the joint effect of subjective and structural changes, parenthood was shown to have the potential of making the pendulum swing from the life on the street to domestic life and childcare responsibilities. With hindsight, all parents seemed to appreciate the chance that parenthood had given them and, overall, they were proud of themselves as parents. Initially dreaded life change was eventually considered as a saviour that gave the life the meaning and saved parents from destroying their life or even from death. However, with regard to the risk of potential death in particular, we should keep a critical perspective. It is not to say that the risk of death does not increase with gang entry, but it is a rather popular myth that gang membership is a straight lane surely leading to prison or death. This myth is immortalised by both the media and gang members themselves. The latter would often exaggerate what they and their gang had been up to; they embellish the stories to make themselves look harder and to bolster their reputation. Most of the time, the violence and serious injury of gang members occurs only in a “street talk” rather than in action (Regan, 2011). If we look at the statistics, between 2005 and the beginning of November 2015, there have been 183 teenage homicides in London. However, we are not able to state for certain how many of these can be genuinely traced back to territorial issues and considered as “gang-related”; most likely, not more than a half.  

8.4 Recap

The findings in this study appear to replicate those of earlier studies referred to in the literature review and including Graham and Bowling (1995), Moloney et al. (2009, 2011) and Edin et al. (2004) amongst a few. In all of these studies, parenthood was a likely trigger of positive self-transformation in the lives of young people involved in crime and/or gangs. For many of the parents in this study, the risk of the ultimate paternal “feared self” (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009) – the parent who did they now want to become, that is, absent, irresponsible and egocentric – served as a dominant, motivational factor.

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14 http://www.citizensreportuk.org/reports/teenage-murder-london.html
encouraging gang desistance. Relatedly, dedication to provide for their children the type of life they had never had themselves made disengagement yet more important to achieve.

Moreover, a number of parents were able to make the past life fall into place, made a meaning of it and subsequently built up “redemption scripts”. They looked at their gang membership as resulting from being a victim of both society and circumstances. They reinterpreted their pasts and such transformed identity was compatible with a non-gang way of living (Maruna, 2001). The key elements of Maruna’s approach also find reflection in parents “paying back” for the harm they had caused by taking on generative work in, for instance, projects focused on supporting young people wishing to find a way out from gangs. Most of them showed that they had become effective agents and they were regularly seeking opportunities to improve their and their children’s quality of life and taking ownership of the future.

8.5 Study Limitations

This was an exploratory study, which presented the findings on life experiences and subjective viewpoints of a small sample of former gang members who had become parents. Whilst, by means of interviewing, we gather subjective accounts rich in detail, the sample size implies that caution is necessary in across-studies comparisons (Massoglia and Uggen, 2007) as the results may be specific to the group of former gang members that were interviewed.

There is some risk that as a middle-class, educated, white female, I experienced some “smoothening out” of lived ex-gang members’ experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2006). For several of my interviewees, it was not the first time they were interviewed by a researcher, which could have made them more skilled in working out the language as used by professionals (not more skilled in the language they use to talk about their experiences, Hallsworth and Young, 2008). It was anticipated that, in the circumstances of the interview, gang members’ suspicion of others increases the likelihood of under- and overstatements, cover-up or downright dishonesty, which all normally tend to come up in any exchange (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). There is also always a chance that interviewees may have been embellishing their role within a group and its actions (Decker and Van Winkle, 1996). To moderate the afore-mentioned risks, my theoretical stand and the applied methodology ensured that interviewees should be looked at as effective
storytellers, expressing their very own narrative accounts (Sandberg, 2010). I made clear that their life stories and their viewpoints could potentially serve to respond to the needs of adolescent parents in a more general way. Also, whether young parents’ portrayal of their parenthood experience and its link to their gang membership was objectively truthful was of less research interest than the ways they used to construct their narrative and the meaning they attributed to the past experiences. Like Nelson (2001, p.15) stated: “The depictive, selective, interpretive, and connective features of a story all work together to give the story its overall meaning” and these stories do not remain exactly the same as they are retold on multiple occasions. The focus of this study was therefore one singular account of each individual’s story as provided during the interview.

Another issue is that the likely effect of parenthood on desistance from a gang does not necessarily exist in a vacuum i.e. additional factors such as moving out from a disadvantaged neighbourhood or support from pro-social others are likely to play a reinforcing role. Relatedly, one needs to always remember that the full package of responsibility (i.e. for instance, marriage plus parenthood) is likely to induce a greater impact on desistance process than parenthood on its own (Giordano et al., 2002) and that due to this strong inter-link between different events, the emerging picture is usually very complex. By reason of time constraints imposed on the fieldwork for this study, I was not able to recruit into my sample just those individuals displaying the homogeneity in the dynamic contextual factors (e.g. relationship and employment status at the time of the interview). As the pattern was varied, the chance existed that at least to some extent the parenthood effect was mediated by other factors. The research could have for instance benefited more if the examination of the issue of parenthood per se had been enhanced by the more thorough analysis of the characteristics of the parent-child relationship.

According to Ganem and Agnew (2007), the relationship quality is hypothesised to substantially correlate with offending more in certain groups (including teenage parents) than in others. Including “relationship quality” in further research would possibly improve study findings’ validity. It would also be noteworthy if future studies examined outcomes for the participants’ children themselves. To the best of my knowledge, none like these have been conducted to date. At the end of the day, it is these children who have the most to win or miss depending on whether their parents stay on the pathway of desistance.

I have also earlier acknowledged the fact that the paths of causality can be complex and interactive. For some participants, parenthood appeared to be direct and causal in relation
to gang disengagement, and for others, it may have been a correlate of maturation, or due to other factors; the extent of causality may indeed be challenging to estimate. At the same time however, my purpose was to meticulously depict the clear patterns of behavioural and identity changes for a group of young parents. I cannot predict what the outcome would have been for these participants if they had not become parents at the time they had but my study has been illustrative of when the changes occurred and what they involved. Only a prospective longitudinal study would be capable of elucidating the problem of causality more at the same time avoiding retrospective bias. This was a snapshot study and did not follow the participants further into their parenthood journey. If this were the possibility, more knowledge would be gained about parents’ actual experiences once they had attempted to implement their parental intentions and later, when seeing their children grow up. We would be able to better see how all the plans play out over time and whether the changes that parents had started to make are really long lasting. Last but not least, the fact that desistance from gang membership is argued to be a process makes for another argument that longitudinal data would be more fitting.

Finally, all young parents I interviewed in this study considered themselves to be “ex-gang members.” I endeavoured to secure interviews also with those young people for whom the experience of parenthood had not had a similar effect. However, this proved unachievable. The nature of the community programmes whose gatekeepers facilitated my access to the study participants is that young people in it had either intentionally sought support from the organisations or at least had been referred from other services having expressed willingness to change. If they had not been willing to change, they would have not been there in the first place. For that reason, all but one young parent I recruited were “positive examples”. They were the living proof that becoming a parent is highly likely to imply the decision of gang exit. In order to be able to speak to those young people who had not disengaged from a gang, I would have either had to get an access to those who had dropped out of the programme or had never participated in it in the first place (but were known to either a gatekeeper or desisters, or both). With regard to the first option, that is, non-desisters known to gatekeepers, I did not recruit anybody at least because these community programmes (mainly due to lack of funds and staff shortages) do not generally keep track of dropouts. Gatekeepers spoke to me about young people fitting the inclusion criteria, who had participated in the programme at some point, but their life-stories were not followed afterwards. Then, during the interviews with the study participants, I strived to use snowball sampling, that is, asked them to recruit, on my behalf, fellow gang
members who were parents and non-desisters. The majority of them instantly refused; it felt that there was some sort of “code of silence” and protection from outsiders prevailing about gang membership. Three participants initially agreed to help and provided me with their contact email addresses but never responded to my request (I contacted each of them on three occasions, once a fortnight, starting a week after our interviews). Next time, and assuming that I would have more resources at my disposal (both in terms of time and finance), I would both be more persistent, that is, would try to engage the gatekeeper yet more and/or would benefit from the help of the research assistant that would share more features in common with the study group. The incorporation of parents-non-desisters would allow us to see the more balanced picture, that is, although parenthood may serve as a trigger of gang disengagement and positive self-transformation, it is in no case a magic remedy.

8.6 Policy implications

The interviewees expressed an intense and persistent desire to be “good parents” for their children, and disengagement from a gang was a stepping-stone on the way to realise this imagined construct. However, all had to confront substantial obstacles trying to achieve these goals, both in the short and in the long-term. Among these barriers were problems related to the breakdown of a relationship with the other parent, prevalent lack of role models who would share “good practice” and the scarcity of structural resources. The findings of this study combined with earlier research that studied larger samples (e.g., Sampson and Laub, 2003) imply that to actively act upon the opportunity that becoming a parent affords, young parents necessitate a systematised intervention.

The findings of this study are thus remarkably useful for gang programming, which by and large has had a tendency to consider all gang members as if they were identical on a spectrum of dimensions including: embeddedness in a gang, lingering ties to a gang and, what was the essence of this research, experience of early parenthood. This study demonstrated that as much as parenthood experience may have effectively served as a facilitator of gang disengagement, the process was still challenging and time-consuming as those who spent in a gang a long period of time remained entangled in a web of ties to their former gang network. The volatility of new parenthood as a possible turning point in the life of a young gang member denotes it as a timely occasion when assistance could be provided. Rumgay (2004, p.405) maintained that “for an opportunity for desistance to be
seized, it not only must present itself to the offender but also must be both recognized and valued as such—successful desistance from crime may be rooted in recognition of an opportunity to claim an alternative, desired, and socially approved identity.” The interviewed young people had been indifferent to any supportive intervention prior to becoming parents. However, parenthood triggered for many a change in priorities and attitude towards life, and this appears to be a convenient moment for encouraging them to engage in conventional activities: going back to education, acquiring vocational skills and so on. Based on parents’ accounts, several recommendations can be proposed that, if implemented on a wider scale, are likely to increase the chance of parents enacting their parental roles successfully.

**Recommendation 1:**

*No “works for all” approach – “good” parenthood programme needs to be individually tailored.*

The great majority of services aimed at delivering the support to gang members do not succeed at recognising that lived experiences are different for males and females. A programme that specifically caters for the needs of gang-involved males would not truly reflect the needs of young females and vice versa. The very same observation seems to be relevant with regard to the programmes supporting those who have become parents. What the interviews with young fathers showed however was that more often than not young fathers remain, if not completely disregarded, at least marginalised by mother-centred services. These findings showed that not visible and effective enough a change has occurred in the last decade in the area of support provision for young fathers, echoing the message from the studies by Pollock, Trew and Jones (2005) and Higginbottom et al. (2006). In the former study, the twenty-three fathers (mainly Black) that participated were all committed to playing an active role in the children’s upbringing. However, it was discovered that they were systematically excluded in a London hospital maternity services in the antenatal period with the key focus being just mothers; they were not supported in developing their emerging father identities. The latter study also pertained to the services being aimed at mothers. Even those services that at the first glance appear to be “father friendly”, often lack individually tailored support for fathers but on the contrary try to replicate the same ideas already used with young mothers. They are not used to facilitating
the development of a separate “father identity” that young fathers can get hold of in their own right (Cundy, 2012).

The scarcity of initiatives supporting young fathers is likely to a great extent stem from the fact that the society in general tends to think of “mothers” first in the context of parenthood and, in the number of parenthood-related initiatives, young fathers do not tend to receive the same extent of recognition. Out of all the parents I spoke to, five were being supported by St Michael’s Fellowship and one of its practitioners told me on one occasion that “many children and family services are still mother-focused and struggle to engage with fathers as a result. We really need to understand that families need fathers and that father’s role is just very important.” The critical point here is that each and every gang-involved young father and young mother is unique. Though there are some overlapping patterns in places between the two groups, there is also an array of differences related to any stage on a gang-membership continuum including gang exit. Any services that young people receive must consider and address these inter-gender differences. The family policies, which afford the greatest prospect of success, are those that would recognise that fathers are both different from and not less important than mothers. What should guide the policy-making and delivery of parental services is the child’s wellbeing and it is in the best interest of a child for both a mother and a father to be given recognition and the same level of support.

**Recommendation 2:**

*Parents should be able to receive support early enough into their parenthood journey.*

Fathers in this study were pointing out that the hope and motivation they had with regard to fatherhood was often mismatched with the available opportunities to achieve their ambitions. Either the services were not adequately targeting the areas of need as highlighted by George or they were not readily available for those exiting the criminal justice system (e.g. Karim, Sheldon). Karim and Sheldon were not given a chance to attend any parenting courses in prison and after their release; there was nobody to make sure that they would get any support either. And young parents really need structured support – especially related to employment and housing situation – to have a real prospect of enacting a role of a parent effectively. It is a common stereotype that a lot of young fathers are irresponsible and do not want to get involved in child rearing. As much as it can be true for some, it is unmerited to generalise this to the whole population. Very often, young
fathers do genuinely want to get involved (including George, Karim, Jake) but they struggle to aggregate personal resources to match these expectations. According to Smeeding, Garfinkel and Mincy (2011), if the momentum is missed and a father does not get successfully engaged in child’s rearing before a child turns five-years-old, it may be very difficult if not impossible to engage a parent in “active parenthood” at a later stage as motivation and aspirations tend to subside with time. That is why the optimum time for intensive intervention is during a child’s mother pregnancy and in the first months of child’s life when there is a chance for both the higher level of father’s motivation and the relationship with the child’s mother to still be there.

Recommendation 3:

The development of strong, trusting relationships should be at the centre of any initiative.

(a) In the family context – to facilitate “co-parenting”

The programmes by Carney’s Community and St Michael’s also serve a very important role for these young fathers who do not live on a permanent basis with their child/children. In these cases of non-residential fatherhood, the quality of the mother-father relationship was a key determinant in how the father was able to develop the relationship with his child. Apart from Tyrelle, none of the fathers was living permanently with their child/children at the time of the interviews. And the interviews reinforced the image of mothers as gatekeepers (Edin, Kefalas, and Reed, 2004; Mauer, Pleck, and Rane, 2001). It was anticipated that the poorer the quality of a mother-father relationship was, the less opportunity fathers had to fully enact their roles and, consequently, the less likely they were to take a full advantage of the stabilising effect of fatherhood. Ensuring that the relationships with a child’s mother and a family at large exist and are not adversary is therefore crucial in order to boost the transformative potential that fatherhood affords. Engaging uniquely with teenage mothers and not giving young fathers enough recognition only reinforces unfavourable stereotypes.

(b) In the context of relationships between a service-provider and a recipient of support

To increase the likelihood of a positive outcome, the relationship needs to be firmly grounded in reality; shall not be inauthentic enacting of an assigned role. In any case, most young people need a long time to begin to trust service providers mainly because, more
often than not, there are no experiences these two groups would share. Finding the
dimensions on which both sides are able to find the connection is a lengthy process hence
establishing a genuine sense of intimacy and understanding is a very hard mission. The
relationships between youth and service providers are likely to uncover alternate pathways
and provide young people with tools to make the best use of them (Haudenhuyse,
Theeboom, and Coalter, 2012; Nichols, 2007). They afford a young person a chance to
grow in self-esteem, perseverance and focus on realising set objectives.

**Recommendation 4:**

*It is not about “fixing” a young person – the objective is situational management.*

It does happen quite often that service-providers seem to act as if their mission was to
somehow “mend” the gang member whereas they should really be concentrating on
providing him/her with the tools that would increase the chance of a young person leading a
productive life and being a responsible parent. Based on the needs as signaled by the
interviewed parents and the scope of support they had received, it does seem that an
efficient strategic solution may be for the services to merge a “social intervention” with
“social opportunities”. As Howell (2009, p.158) pointed out, social intervention’s objective
is “reaching out to the gang-involved youth and their families, linking them with the
conventional world and needed services.” The “social opportunity” part endeavours to
attend to the prevalent risk factors behind gang membership including unemployment and
the lack of education qualifications. Acting as a deterrent from continued involvement,
social opportunities afford young people a more long-term objective that would enable
them to reach some self-fulfillment by legitimate means. These may include for instance:
vocational skills training, filling in educational gaps (Decker and van Winkle, 1996),
securing employment, having a stable housing situation. Within these areas, both short-
term and long-term plans should be devised with realistic objectives to be achieved by an
individual. Even after the programme has formally finished, the ongoing support should be
made available when necessary.

Second, gang members’ personal needs including, above all, anger management issues,
mental health and substance abuse problems, must be addressed. In particular, gang
membership favours developing an identity grounded in aggression and violence, which
Giordano et al. (2007) called an “anger identity”. This is an area, where an early
intervention can really make a difference regardless of whether an individual has already started to benefit from the social opportunities. Additionally, addressing personal needs in a timely manner does in fact increase the likelihood that an individual would be able to benefit from them more wholesomely. This is very relevant, for instance, to Karim who said that he had broken up with his son’s mother because of his domestic violence and verbal abuse towards her. At the same time however, he was not receiving any support specifically targeted at his anger issues. When it comes to mental health problems (e.g. depression, anxiety), it is believed that, in England, amongst the young people who enter the criminal justice system, they are more prevalent in gang members than their non-gang involved counterparts (Khan et al., 2013). I am not aware of the underlying mental health problems amongst parents in my study but Jason, for instance, suffered from severe learning difficulties, which impeded his attempts at finding employment and, to the best of my knowledge, his needs in that context were not being addressed.

**Recommendation 5:**

*There is an immense need for devising strategies of monitoring young people’s progress after they have left the programme.*

Due to the frequent lack of systematic records of post-attendance behaviours, it is difficult to evaluate the relative effectiveness of the majority of support programmes. On the one hand, among interviewed parents, there were cases filling with optimism such as those of Trevor and Jake who, by means of the Young Dads programme, successfully turned their lives around – secured a job, gained education qualifications, built a quality relationship with their children and then engaged in generative pursuits by volunteering in the programme to share personal experiences of their journey. It is of great benefit for those who had graduated from the programme themselves to remain engaged in it, this time as “givers”. It also renders practitioners’ work “more credible in the eyes of gang-involved young people looking for an exit” (Centre for Social Justice, 2009).

On the other hand however, as I learnt from my further communication with the Young Dads programme leader, Karim dropped out from the programme exactly three months after I had interviewed him in July 2013. He stopped answering his phone and became unreachable, which eventually led to closing his case. It was unknown where he was and how he was coping. His case does not by any means serve to diminish all the positivity
coming from this and similar projects but just demonstrates the inherent challenge, namely, the evaluation of success. However, at the same time, we have to be able to work out indicators of effectiveness as no evaluation means no constructive feedback and therefore prevents any improvements.

The main reason why it is vital to attempt to take these recommendations on board is that the current initiatives, that is, for instance, the “Troubled Families” government scheme, (and their predecessor, the FIPs) have been inadequate. Gang involvement needs to be, and it has not been so far, clearly specified in the inclusion criteria for the Troubled Families scheme. Research by Catch 22 (2013) found that family circumstances cannot be “copied and pasted” for every individual, as families from which gang members come vary hugely. Many of these families, plainly requiring support, would not meet the inclusion criteria for the scheme. Also, the information on gang membership is not normally gathered. Hence, it is not certain to what extent the scheme manages to pick up the families, in which there may be several individuals involved in gang life. Neither this scheme nor many others yet meet the benchmark of being “gang sensitive” in that they would actively detect gang membership, confront an individual’s beliefs and ideas that had been in favour of gangs, and address an array of family indicators (including for instance, teenage pregnancy). This includes CJS-oriented interventions, which rather than being tailored to an individual’s needs, are more often than not repetitively applied to the population of gang members as a whole. When viewed from this perspective, and as suggested in this chapter’s recommendations, we are in urgent need of developing more initiatives that cater for specific needs, that emphasise the role of developing trust-based relationships with other family members and that, instead of labelling and stigmatising, divert attention to pro-social opportunities.

- Thank you –
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APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

You are being invited to take part in a research study, which will help me get my PhD in Criminology at the University of Manchester. The PhD is a book I’m writing about parenting and gangs and I need to interview relevant people first so I can understand their experiences. Before you decide to take part, it is important for you to understand why I am doing this research and what it will involve. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

Rationale
I want to understand what it’s like to be involved in a youth gang and then to become a parent. Does it change the way you see yourself and those around you? Does it change what you want out of life, what you do and who you see? And is this different for mums and dads? I want to explore this by listening to the life stories of people who’ve had these experiences.

What will happen to me if I take part?
The kinds of things I would like to know about are: how did becoming a parent make you think about yourself and your lifestyle? What effect did it have on you being in a gang? How have you juggled parenting and gang life? We will talk for as long as you wish. If you don’t mind, I will audio-record the interview. Otherwise, I will make notes. Any question that I ask you that you think is too personal, you don’t have to answer. If you need some time during the interview, we can also make a short break.

Why have I been chosen?
You have been chosen because you are at least 18 years old, you were or you are in a youth gang and you are a parent.

Will I be remunerated for my participation?
You will be given £25 as my “thank you” for your time and effort.

Where will the research be conducted?
Interviews will be run in the community centre, in a room where you feel comfortable.

Anonymity & Confidentiality
Everything you tell me stays confidential which means that I will not discuss these details with other interviewees or with any other person. Once I write this book, all collected data will be destroyed. In order to keep your identity confidential, I will make up a name for you (or you can tell me what you want to be called). I will give access to the anonymised transcripts of your interview to my supervisors if they ask me for that but only I will have access to the original recordings, your consent form and any of your contact details. I will make sure that the transcription of my interview with you will be
kept secure on my laptop, protected by a password and on my University computer hard-drive also password-protected.

**Withdrawal**
Your participation is voluntary which means that you are free to stop the interview at any time. Should you do so, all data relating to you will be destroyed. If you request, after you have already completed your participation, for your data to be removed, I will do so as long as I have not yet finished the research report about your participation.

**Will the outcomes of the research be published?**
First, I will use the findings of this study in my PhD. I will also speak about the study at academic conferences and it will be published in academic journals. With your permission, the anonymised interview data may be shared with other researchers working in this field. In all cases, anonymity and confidentiality will still be maintained.

*In case you needed any help or advice following your participation in the study and you would like to speak to someone you can contact one of the following for assistance:*

- Researcher: Natalia Lemanska ([natalia.lemanska@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk](mailto:natalia.lemanska@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk))
- Researcher’s Supervisors:
  - 1. Mr Jon Shute, Manchester University School of Law ([jon.shute@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:jon.shute@manchester.ac.uk))
  - 2. Dr. Juanjo Medina Ariza, Manchester University School of Law ([juanjo.medina@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:juanjo.medina@manchester.ac.uk))

Do you have any questions?

**To make a formal complaint about the conduct of the research contact:**

- Head of the Research Office
- Christie Building
- University of Manchester
- Oxford Road
- Manchester M13 9PL
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Project Title
The effect of becoming a parent on disengagement from gangs

Researcher’s Name: Natalia Lemanska
Thesis Supervisors’ Names: Mr Jon Shute Dr Juanjo Medina Ariza

Consent
The purpose of this form is to ensure that you are willing to take part in this study and to let you understand what it entails. Signing this form does not commit you to anything you do not wish to do.

Have you read and understood the Participant Information Sheet? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Have you had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss the study? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Have you received satisfactory answers to your questions? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from the study

☐ at any time before I complete the research? ☐ Yes ☐ No

☐ without having to give a reason? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Do you agree for the interviews to be audio-recorded? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Do you agree to the use of anonymous quotes? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Do you agree for the anonymised interview data to be shared with other researchers? ☐ Yes ☐ No

I agree to take part in the above study ☐ Yes ☐ No

Name of participant ____________________ Signature ____________________ Date ________________

Name of researcher ____________________ Signature ____________________ Date ________________