

Theoretical Foundations for Gang Membership

by

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to explain gang membership, as a substantive offense, using Agnew's General Strain Theory. The explanation of membership by Agnew's General Strain Theory will focus on the risk factors identified in previous research. Two counter arguments will be presented describing gang membership, Hirschi's Social Bond Theory, and Sutherland's Differential Association Theory.

The Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, gang recently was the target of Operation Community Shield, which was led by the United States Department of Homeland Security. The resulting arrests of 103 members, "...has at least put a small dent in a criminal organization that authorities think represents a growing menace in cities across the country" (Wood, 2005, para. 2). The 2002 National Youth Gang Survey reports that an estimated 21,500 gangs are present in the United States, with approximately 731,500 members (Egley, & Major, 2004). These numbers suggest a continuing trend of decreasing membership, and fewer gang problems within the United States. "The estimated number of gang members between 1996 and 2002 decreased 14 percent and the estimated number of jurisdictions experiencing gang problems decreased 32 percent" (Egley, & Major, 2004, p. 2). Even though we are experiencing a decrease in gang membership, and gang problems, the violence associated with gangs continues to be of issue. The Christian Science Monitor reported, in January of 2005, that even though the murder rate decreased in 2004 for many cities problems with gang violence persisted (Paulson, & Miller, 2005). Triplett (2004) feels that while the gang problem declined during the 1990s it is now starting to increase. Egley,

Howell, and Major (2004) evaluated the National Youth Gang Surveys from 1996 to 2002, the findings show an overall decline from 1996 to 2002, however the membership has increased from 2001 to 2002. Today, the major gangs operating in the United States include: MS-13, the Latin Kings, Black Gangster Disciple Nation, Crips, Bloods, Aryan Nation, a number of prison gangs, and several motorcycle gangs. Gangs are no longer isolated to poor, minority communities and neighborhoods, "...membership has crossed all socioeconomic, ethnic, and racial boundaries, and now permeates American Society" (NAGIA, 2000, para 1).

The goals of this paper are to: address the current discussion surrounding gang definitions, then to examine membership within a gang as a substantive offense, and finally, address the reasons youth join gangs by evaluating three major longitudinal studies, of gang risk factors, within the United States. This examination will include a theoretical overview of gang membership as explained by three major criminological theories: Agnew's General Strain Theory (1992), Hirschi's Social Bond Theory (1969/2004), and Sutherland's Differential Association Theory (1960/1999).

Gang Definition

Prior to 1927 there was an absence of gang research within the sociological literature. In his dissertation, Frederic Thrasher (1927 / 2000) presented the first major study of gangs based on his work in Chicago. Since Thrasher's publication, there has been a lot of research and theorization on what constitutes a gang, why people join gangs, and how significant gangs are in community and society. The latter of these questions is hard to answer without first addressing the concept of what a gang is. Defining concepts is typically a straight forward process. However, in the case of defining 'gang,' this is not so. Rather, a consistent definition of 'gang' is lacking in both the fields of law enforcement and criminological research. Without having a universally accepted definition, the latter questions are harder to answer on a consistent basis.

Failure within the criminological field to develop a consistent definition of what constitutes a gang has not been for lack of trying. Thrasher (1927/2000) commenced the conceptualization of gangs within his dissertation by suggesting:

The gang is an interstitial group originally formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict. It is characterized by the following types of behavior: meeting face to face, milling, movement through space as a unit, conflict, and planning. The result of this collective behavior

is the development of tradition, unreflective internal structure, esprit de corps, solidarity, morale, group awareness, and attachment to a local territory.¹ (p. 18)

By today's standard, the major issue of concern with this definition is the lack of inclusion of deviant or criminal behavior as a primary gang activity. This definition could lead one to conclude that many social groups appearing today would be considered gangs. George Knox (Thrasher, 2000, preface) feels that many of the 1,313 gangs that Thrasher first studied would not be gangs today, by current definitions. Of the approximately thirteen hundred groups Thrasher studied Knox believes that only one is still in existence today, and would qualify as a gang.

In order to fully understand the progression of the definition of 'gangs,' a chronological examination of some explanations will be performed. In 1955, Cohen examined the notion of delinquent subcultures forming within communities and neighborhoods. These subcultures were formed in neighborhoods much the same way Boy Scout troops were formed, "The difference lies only in the cultural pattern with which the child associates" (Cohen, 1955, p. 14). The cultural pattern Cohen discusses is one that is, "non-utilitarian, malicious and negativistic" (p. 25). Cohen addresses the criminal or deviant component which is considered vital to today's definition of gangs. Cohen introduces the idea of a cultural pattern, which is applied to the commission of deviant behavior, and therefore suggests the formation of a gang for harmful purposes.

Klein (1971) continued with the inclusion of behavior seen in Cohen as well as the ideas seen in Thrasher. Klein saw a "gang" as:

Any denotable adolescent group of youngsters who (a) are generally perceived as a distinct aggregation by others in their neighborhood, (b) recognize themselves as a denotable group (almost invariably with a group name), and (c) have been involved in sufficient number of delinquent incidents to call forth a consistent negative response from neighborhood residents and / or law enforcement agencies. (p. 428)

This definition uses the basis that we saw originally in Thrasher; subsequently Klein added the idea of behavior from Cohen and specifically focused on the delinquent acts. Klein also indicated a societal reaction to the behavior demonstrated by the group. Miller's work defines a youth gang as a:

...self formed association of peers, bound together by mutual interests, with identifiable leadership, well-developed lines of authority, and other organizational features, who act in

concert to achieve a specific purpose or purposes which generally include the conduct of illegal activity and control over a particular territory, facility or type of enterprise. (p. 121)

Miller's definition relies on Klein and Cohen by placing emphasis on criminal activity while incorporating Thrasher's notion of territory.

Knox (2000) writes that, "A group is a gang when it exists for or benefits substantially from the continuing criminal activity of its members" (p. 7). This is a much broader definition than we have previously seen. Knox feels that only specifying 'youth' within the definition terminology does not correspond with many gangs which have both adult and youth members. In previous definitions, we have also seen a limitation of geographic vicinity. Knox (2000) shows that including geographic vicinity limits the definition of a gang so as not to include those that encompass different neighborhoods, and arenas, such as prison, but are working together in efforts to participate in criminal activity.

The definitions mentioned here are only a small portion of the published ideas and thoughts about what constitutes a 'gang'. Ball and Curry (1995) write that the "aspects of the phenomena in question" are the basis of the definitions that are produced at that time; and as these phenomena change so will the definition (para. 41). This phenomenon can be seen in the definitions discussed above. Ball and Curry feel that researchers should focus on the "abstract and formal characteristics of the phenomena" (para. 46). Ironically, Ball and Curry formulate a definition of 'gang' by examining the organization as well as presenting a gang as a social system:

The gang is a spontaneous, semisecret, interstitial, integrated but mutable social system whose members share common interests and that function with relatively little regard for legality but regulates interaction among its members and features a leadership structure with processes of organizational maintenance and membership services and adaptive mechanisms for dealing with other significant social systems in its environment. (para. 47)

The abstractness of the term 'gang' is apparent, and has been discussed in the literature. There is little consensus on the true definition (Ball, & Curry; Esbesen, Winfree, He, & Taylor, 2001; Horowitz, 1990; Knox, 2000). Knox writes that all definitions agree on one concept: gangs are groups of people. The varieties of definitions are often associated with the multitude of visible street and prison gangs. The variations present between the groups can lead to confusion while trying to define the concept of a 'gang.'

This lack of consensus provides both opportunities and restrictions on policy development and implementation and in research. Horowitz (1990) sees an opportunity in the lack of consensus as it allows, "... for the exploration of distinct aspects of the gang experience" (p. 53). Allowing for open - ended research and the flexibility to pursue different tracks within this broad concept provides a more dynamic approach to the field of gang research. The restrictions and complications are apparent in that we are not able to produce a consistent starting point or research variable that will allow us to perform comparative research.

This paper has set out to examine, by way of three theoretical perspectives, why people join gangs. The lack of a formal definition does not prevent us from examining the notion of gang membership or the reasons for joining gangs. A comprehensive definition of a gang includes three elements from previous explanations. Conceptually, a definition should include: that a gang is a group of people, who participate in criminal behavior, and have at least one common symbol of identity. Adding further elements to the definition places constraints on the inclusion of the groups being defined. However, in terms of operationalization most studies ask youth to self-report their involvement. Therefore, within the context of this examination the formal definition of a gang is unnecessary. The empirical evidence used focused on the self-reporting of gang membership. If a youth reports that he or she is a member of a gang, that in and of itself should be enough for us to conclude the intent of membership is present. As such, self report data concerning risk factors for involvement and benefits of membership can be gathered from self-identified gang members. Peterson, Taylor, and Esbensen (2004) used a similar approach to the conflict surrounding 'gang' definition and membership questions by studying those individuals who responded to a survey by initially indicating that they were gang members. The use of this technique allows for the broadest study sample (Peterson, et al, 2004). An examination of why they report membership can occur even though the formal definition of the organization to which they belong is unclear.

Risk Factors for Gang Membership

There have been numerous longitudinal studies examining the impact of risk factors leading to gang membership. Howell (1998) divided the risk factors into five domains allowing for easier reporting and examination. The five domains are: community, family, school, peer group, and individual. Discussion about risk factors, within this paper, will use the same categorization technique. The risk factors will be discussed in conjunction with the three theoretical perspectives to show why youth join

gangs. The majority of risk factors examined in this paper were identified as part of three longitudinal studies: the Rochester Youth Development Study (Thornberry, 1998), Denver Youth Survey (Esbensen, Huizinga, & Weiher, 1993), and the Seattle Social Development Project (Hill, Howell, Hawkins, & Battin-Pearson, 1999).

Initially Thrasher (1937 / 2000) viewed formations of gangs due to social disorganization, an attribute of the community domain. The Seattle Social Development Project found significant risk factors within the community domain such that the availability of marijuana, other delinquent youth, and a lower level of attachment to the neighborhood lead to a higher likelihood of gang involvement (Hill et al., 1999). The Rochester Youth Development Study reported that neighborhood interaction was inversely related to gang membership. Thornberry (1998) did not find a significant relationship in terms of disorganized neighborhoods, or levels of violence within the neighborhood to gang membership. Another key factor, to membership, is youth facing “barriers to and lack of economic opportunities” (as cited in Howell, 1998, p. 6). Friedman, Mann, and Friedman (1975) identified labeling by community members of delinquent youth as a common factor found among youth in gangs.

According to Howell (1998), within the family domain there are several risk factors related to gang membership. Howell reported in his literature review almost all studies show a correlation between low socio-economic status and gang membership. However Lahey, Gordon, Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Farrington (1999) did not find this in their study of Pittsburgh youth:

We did find a significant interaction between family income and age, however that suggests that higher family income tends to protect youths from gang entry during late adolescence, but higher family income was associated with higher risk of serious gang entry during early adolescence. (p. 274)

The Denver Youth Study found an increased likelihood of gang membership when respondents lived in single parent homes (Esbensen et al., 1993). In Seattle, Hill et al. (1999) found family disorganization directly correlated with gang membership. In addition, the Seattle (Hill et al.) study found that if adults other than the parents were present in the home, youth were at higher risk for gang involvement. Again, the Pittsburgh study by Lahey et al. could not confirm these results. The Seattle (Hill et al.) study did not find any significant relationship between attachment to mother or father and parental drinking as indicators for increased gang involvement. The Rochester Youth

Study incorporated the impact of socio-economic status and found that those youth growing up in families below the federal poverty level had an increased likelihood of gang membership (Thornberry, 1998). Thornberry also found that attachment and parental supervision were inversely related to gang membership; however, involvement in family activities was not significant. As seen in Hill et al. and Esbensen et al. (1993) a correlation between single parent families and gang membership was identifiable. In addition, an inverse relationship was seen between parental supervision and attachment in regards to gang membership. A defiant relationship between parents and youth was associated with membership in gang activity in a study performed by Friedman et al. (1976).

The Rochester Youth Study recognized three areas within the school domain that increase the likelihood of gang membership (Thornberry, 1998). A low expectation of school performance, a low commitment to the school setting, and poor attachment to teachers will all contribute to an increased likelihood of participating in gangs. The Denver Youth Study found that gang members are, "...more likely to perceive their teachers as labeling them either as bad or disturbed..." (Esbensen, et al.1993, p.105). The Seattle Social Development Project found similar results to that of the Rochester Youth Study including an inverse relationship between academic achievement, attachment to school, commitment to school, and educational aspirations (Hill et al., 1999). In a study of junior high and high school youth, in New Mexico, Winfree, Jr., Fuller, Vigil, Mays (1992) found poor academic achievement as a risk factor to gang membership.

High commitment to delinquent peers was seen in the Denver Youth Survey as a risk factor toward gang membership (Esbensen et al., 1993). This was also seen in a study by Vigil and Yun (1990) while examining Vietnamese Youth gangs in California. Vigil and Yun report an affection and personal bond between members, "...intense personal bonds are formed and maintained... 'We have a lot of respect and love for each other.'..." (p. 161). Thornberry (1998) found interaction and association by younger males with delinquent peers to be a predictor of future gang membership. In Seattle, Hill et al. (1999), like Thornberry, found the interaction with delinquent peers indicative of future gang membership. Esbensen et al. (1993) also found that, "...gang members and street offenders were less likely to listen to friends if they told them that it was wrong to do something" (p. 105). Within this domain commitment and interaction with negative peers, as well as avoiding contact with positive peers all were predictors for gang involvement.

The last domain within Howell's (1998) structure is that of individual risk factors. The three major studies each identified an association between

gang membership and drug and alcohol use. The Denver Youth Survey (Esbensen et al., 1993) and the Seattle Social Development Project (Hill et al., 1999) found correlations between deviant attitudes supporting norm violating behavior and gang membership. In the Seattle Development Project (Hill et al.) rejection of conventional beliefs is seen as a predicting variable. Friedman, Mann, and Friedman (1975) found that youth who were violent were most likely to establish gang membership. Thornberry (1998) found that youth with low self-esteem, and depression were at an increased likelihood of joining gangs. Friedman, Mann, and Friedman also saw a sense of strain being formed, "...gang members had more unrealistic expectations for success, yet perceived less opportunity to be successful through the more traditional vocational channels of society" (p. 601). This finding is key when examining the strain theory since the Friedman, Mann, and Friedman study only focused on lower – class youth which was a common factor found in a majority of studies according to Howell (1998).

A theory of gang membership must take into account these significant risk factors as shown above; within the community the impact of disorganization, drug availability, labeling by neighborhood residents, and the presence of strain in obtaining economic success. The disorganization of the family, family members being present in gangs, parental supervision, as well as the impact of socio-economic status towards gang membership. The lack of attachment and commitment, poor achievement and presence of negative labeling by the staff in school towards youth create an increased likelihood of gang membership. The presence, commitment, and interaction of delinquent peers, as well as low commitment to positive peers all present a positive correlation with gang membership. Finally, the likelihood of gang membership was impacted on the individual level by drug and alcohol usage, the presence of deviant attitudes, low self-esteem, depression, rejection of conventional beliefs, and the formation of strain.

Theoretical Explanations of Gang Membership

The preceding review provides an overview of risk factors often associated with gang membership. Often discussions surrounding why youth join gangs focus on learning theories and social control theories. Recently Howell and Egley Jr. (2005) performed a similar process looking at variables within Thornberry et al.'s interactional theory of gang membership. Here an argument will be presented that the general strain theory presented by Robert Agnew (1992) can provide an explanation of gang membership as well. General strain theory can be used to explain known correlates of gang membership. General strain theory addresses the impact of strain both on the

individual level, as well as within the community domain, the presentation of negative stimuli such as delinquent peers, drugs within the community, and the removal of positive stimuli such as the lack of parental supervision, and attachment. Counter arguments to this theoretical idea will be presented through the use of Hirschi's Control Theory (Hirschi, 1969/2004) and Sutherland's Differential Association Theory (Sutherland, & Cressey, 1960/1999).

In response to the lack of support for the original version of strain theory established by Robert Merton (1938), Agnew (1992) presented a broader version. The General Strain Theory of Crime and Delinquency examined additional types of strain (Agnew). Agnew developed subtypes to the original version of strain, which occurs when there is failure to achieve positively valued goals. Agnew's subtypes include the original strain, which centers on separation between one's aspirations and their achievements. In addition, the subtypes include strain as the disjunction between expectations. The disjunction is formed by experience or comparisons to others, versus their actual achievement. The final subtype is strain caused by the disjunction between equitable outcomes and actual outcomes. The two additional types of strain provided within the General Strain Theory were the removal of a positively valued stimulus from the individual, and the presentation of negative stimuli. Agnew continues to show that only certain people respond to strain through crime. The reasons for turning to crime in response to the strains presented within Agnew's study will not be discussed. Rather, the discussion will center on the factors seen as reasons to join a gang, the connection between them, and the three types of strain presented by Agnew.

The key concept that is often discussed within the first type of strain is that of the American Dream, that being the achievement of wealth and personal goals. Strain occurs when people are unable to achieve their dream. This strain can be caused by many of the different domains presented earlier. In the community domain, for example, Howell reports that studies have shown gang members are often confronted with barriers to, and lack of, economic opportunities. Klein (1995) creates a minimal list of reasons why youth join gangs and one factor is the, "Perception of barriers to jobs and other opportunities" (p. 80). Within the family domain the initial low socio-economic status creates strain for individuals and this has been confirmed by a majority of studies involving gang members. This first type of strain can also be seen in the schools with the idea that strain is created when an individual does not achieve specific outcomes. Agnew (1992) writes, "Individual goals...focus on the achievement of a certain amount of money

or a certain grade-point average” (p. 53). The idea then of strain being created by failure to achieve in school is seen in the three major youth studies (Esbensen, et al., 1993; Hill et al., 1999; Thornberry, 1998). The inclusion of strain caused by failure to achieve goals, not just economic, expands the significance of strain theory to be used to explain gang membership. Failure to incorporate the expanded version of strain would prevent the explanation of middle class, or upper class youth being involved in gangs.

Agnew’s second type of strain is the removal of positively valued stimuli within the person’s life. One of the experiences youth may have which produces this type of strain is that of parents divorcing or separating. A common risk factor that was found in the studies was that of the disorganization of families, and being raised by a single parent family (Esbensen, et al., 1993; Hill et al., 1999; Thornberry, 1998). Klein (1995) also saw significance with lack of adult contact being a risk factor toward gang membership.

The third type of strain, by Agnew, is the presentation of negatively valued stimuli. This form of strain is seen in all five of the domains in the different risk factors that are presented. In the community domain the Seattle Social Development Project identified the presence of marijuana being a risk factor (Hill et al.). The Denver Youth Study found the perception of negative labeling by teachers created an increased risk for gang membership (Esbensen, et al., 1993). Within the peer group domain the presence of delinquent peers serve as a negative stimuli thus creating strain and increasing the likelihood of gang membership. Finally, within the individual domain all of the studies showed positive correlation between drug / alcohol use and gang membership (Esbensen, et al., 1993; Hill et al., 1999; Thornberry, 1998).

Hirschi’s (1969 / 2004) development of the social bond theory presents an interesting counter argument to the idea of strain and reasons for joining a gang. Hirschi focused on the significance of a bond being developed, and the strength of the bond being inversely related to delinquency. In this case, we will examine delinquency in the form of gang membership. In addition, Hirschi expressed the idea of social bonds in four components – attachment, commitment, involvement and belief.

Hirschi (1969 / 2004) describes the idea of attachment as an emotional connection to another person. The failure to achieve an emotional connection will increase the likelihood of delinquency, in this case gang membership. If the individual is lacking attachment to someone they will not be restrained by the reaction that person will have toward their behavior. According to Hirschi, the most important attachment is the relationship

between parents and youth. However, risk factors seen in gang members such as lack of parental role models, as well as family disorganization decreases the likelihood of attachment to parents occurring. As reported earlier in the Rochester Youth Study, Thornberry (1998) found that low parental attachment was a risk factor seen in gang members. In addition, Thornberry found an increased risk for gang membership when students had a lower attachment to their teachers. Friedman, Mann, and Friedman (1975) saw the impact of a defiant parent – child relationship and an increase in the likelihood of gang membership. Klein (1995) also saw the impact of defiance towards parents being a risk factor for gang membership. Within the school setting Hill et al (1999), in the Seattle Youth Study, showed that those individuals who were members of gangs were more likely not to be attached to the school. The impact of attachment on school performance was also promoted by Klein (1995) with both disciplinary and academic defiance in school performance increasing the risk for gang membership.

The second component of Hirschi's (1969 / 2004) bond is that of commitment. To have commitment within the social bond theory one must have conformity to the societal norms. Thus, individuals who do not have stake or conformity in society have little to lose if they participate in criminal activity. Gang members within the Denver Youth Study showed commitment to delinquent peers, and had no consequence to that commitment if they violated the law (Esbensen, et al., 1993). Thornberry (1998) in the Rochester, and Hill, et al. (1999) in the Seattle study found low commitment within the school setting as a risk factor to gang membership.

The third component of Hirschi's (1969 / 2004) bond is involvement in conventional activities. Thrasher found that a lack of conventional activities is a key reason for gang membership. "The gang develops as a response to society. The social group of which the gang boy is a member has failed to provide organized and supervised activities adequate to absorb his interests and exhaust his energies....The gang solves his problem offering him what society has failed to provide" (Thrasher, 1927 / 2000, p. 87). Hill et al. (1999) did not find religious involvement as a predictor of gang membership.

The final component of the social bond is that of belief. Deviants have beliefs that are against those of societal norms and those who believe in the norms and societal rules are less likely to violate them. Both the Denver Youth Study and the Seattle Project found risk factors of deviant attitudes as being associated with that of gang membership, under the individual domain (Esbensen, et al., 1993; Hill, et al., 1999).

The differences between Agnew's (1992) General Strain Theory and Hirschi's (1969 / 2004) Social Bond Theory are the types of relationships that lead to the delinquent behavior, and the specific motivation for delinquency. The lack of relationship within Hirschi's theory is a causal factor of delinquency. Whereas in Agnew's General Strain Theory, the presence of negative relationships imparts, "...the individual with noxious or negative stimuli" (Agnew, 1992, p. 49). The risk factors observed within the longitudinal studies reviewed show that a relationship or interaction with delinquent friends positively correlates with gang membership (Esbensen et al., 1993; Hill et al., 1999). Secondly, the motivation for delinquency differs between the two theoretical perspectives. The motivation described in Hirschi's Social Bond Theory is constructed from delinquents' lack of relationships. Agnew's General Strain Theory identifies the motivation for delinquency as stemming from emotions caused by negative relationships. The use of Agnew's General Strain Theory rather than the traditional strain theories overcomes the criticism that Hirschi presents in his theory. Hirschi summarizes his criticism of the traditional strain theory and delinquency, as:

...delinquency is a relatively permanent attribute of the person and /or a regularly occurring event; it suggests that delinquency is largely restricted to a single social class; and it suggests that persons accepting legitimate goals are, as a result of this acceptance, more likely to commit delinquent acts. (p. 10)

The use of Agnew's General Strain Theory, specifically the inclusion of the impact of negative relationships on strain and the causation of delinquency, overcome Hirschi's criticisms.

The idea of learning the delinquent behavior was presented within Sutherland's Differential Association Theory. The basic premise within Sutherland's theory is that people learn their behavior from those they are around, especially individuals with whom they are intimate (Sutherland, & Cressey, 1960 / 1999). When a person sees definitions favorable to the violation of law over definitions unfavorable to violation of law, he or she will become delinquent (Sutherland, & Cressey). The examination of the above risk factors seen within the domains as well as other risk factors from other studies will provide an explanation to gang membership.

The peer domain shows that a common risk factor of gang membership is a high commitment to delinquent peers, seen in both the Denver Youth study, as well as studies done by Vigil and Yun (1990). This commitment corresponds with the propositions within Sutherland's (1960 / 1999) theory in that youth will learn the behaviors and their attitudes will be

reinforced due to the association. “Together they reinforce beliefs, values, and attitudes that lead to and perpetuate delinquency” (Sheldon, Tracy, & Brown, 2004, p. 194). Thornberry (1998) reports similar results with the association of delinquent peers as a variable impacting gang membership. Hill et al. (1999) in the Seattle study found that having children within the neighborhood who are in trouble is a risk factor for membership. Again, as seen with the peers who are delinquents, the association will create a learning opportunity. The intimacy of a peer would be more significant than a relationship with a child within the neighborhood according to Sutherland. Thus, the significance of a delinquent peer, as seen in Rochester, would be more significant to a youth becoming a gang member than the impact of the children who are in trouble seen in the Seattle study.

The differences between Agnew’s (1992) General Strain Theory and Sutherland’s (Sutherland & Cressey, 1960 / 1999) Differential Association Theory are similar to those between Agnew and Hirschi’s (1969 / 2004) Social Bond Theory. According to Sutherland’s theory, delinquent behavior is caused by a positive reaction from others towards such actions. Delinquents are then motivated by the desirable deviant behavior that is created by those present around him or her. Sutherland’s Differential Association Theory provides an explanation that Hirschi’s Social Bond Theory does not. Specifically, the impact of delinquent peers on the causation of gang membership is described within Sutherland’s Differential Association Theory. However, the theory lacks an explanation for other risk factors. Sutherland’s theory is limited to learning from others, and factors that may increase the likelihood of association with delinquents. The theory does not address other risk factors seen in the literature surrounding gang membership.

Conclusion

The development of a theory surrounding gang membership is limited by the lack of an empirical definition. Creating a theoretical structure of gang membership on self-report data is a significant critique within this area of gang research and in others. Many explanations of gang membership have focused on the risk factors that support social learning theory, and social bond theory. Neither of these two theories fully explains gang membership within their arguments. The addition of Agnew’s General Strain Theory is a positive benefit to the overall explanation of gang membership. Agnew (1992) stated, “...strain theory complements the other major theories of delinquency in a fundamental way” (p. 50). Failure to incorporate the additional explanations provided by Agnew within a theoretical perspective

of gang membership will limit the strength of any proposed theory.

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¹ The concept 'interstitial group' portrays gangs as being developed to fill the open space between other social structures.