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## Introduction

Contemporary evidence suggests gangs are often seen as a context for some young people to reverse their sense of social marginalization by accumulating status and respect (e.g., Anderson, 1999; Deuchar, 2009; Densley, 2013; Harding, 2014). This situation is more acute for young women (Cepeda & Valdez, 2003), and especially young women of color (Miller, 2008), whose situations are “confounded by class, race, and gender issues” (see also Laidler & Hunt, 2001). However, female gang membership and criminal offending is a neglected and misunderstood research topic (Campbell, 1991; Hunt & Joe-Laidler, 2001; Moore & Hagedorn, 2001; Peterson, 2012). Only in recent years have gang scholars become more attuned to women’s involvement in gangs and the ways in which young women construct a gendered gang identity or experience gang entry and exit differently from their male counterparts (Miller & Brunson, 2000). This emerging body of work notwithstanding (for a review, see Panfil & Peterson, 2015), a more comprehensive exploration of the female role in street gangs remains to be done. Added to this, we note the paucity of comparative, qualitative research exploring the nuances of women’s gang involvement beyond the United States.

The current study seeks to address this gap. Drawing upon qualitative interviews with self-nominated female gang members in Los Angeles, California (United States) and Glasgow, Scotland (United Kingdom), we compare and contrast the experiences and perspectives of young women in gangs. In particular, we provide a comparative analysis of our female sample’s initial motivations for gang membership, their activity within gang contexts, how they negotiated and upheld gender roles, their method of entering the gang, and (where relevant) what stimulated their disengagement from it. Prior to outlining the methods used to gather data and the emerging insights, we begin by analyzing the extant literature on female gang membership.

### *Women in Gangs*

From the late 1990s, there has been a significant expansion of scholarship focused on young women’s involvement in gangs and how they interpret their participation in delinquent activity (Maloney, Hunt, Joe-Laidler, & MacKenzie, 2011). Prior to this, a great deal of work tended to portray female gang members in stereotypical ways (for a discussion, see Peterson, 2012) “from personal property to sexual chattel to maladjusted tomboys” and sometimes failed to locate the situational context of being “young, female, of color and poor” (Laidler & Hunt, 2001, p. 657). Traditionally, gang scholarship sought to answer how females “fit” into male gangs. For example, Walter Miller (1975) classified female gangs into three broad types: mixed gender gangs with mixed male/female membership; female gangs that are affiliated with male gangs, which he referred to as “auxiliary” gangs; and independent female gangs (Miller & Brunson, 2000).

Based on research in the United States, Jody Miller (2001) found that mixed gender gangs tended to be most common, with many young women resisting the label “female gang.” Research also finds that sex composition, independent of sex itself, is important in shaping the norms and activities of gangs and their members (Peterson, Miller, & Esbensen, 2001). Some reports suggest that women who become members of mixed gender gangs often are excluded from male delinquent activities and regarded as mere sex objects with no involvement in the violent acts that male members commit (Miller & Brunson, 2000).

However, it is worth questioning if “mixed-gender gang” is still a valid concept. It is likely that by privileging the male role and by obsessing over violence as a means of “ganging,” scholars have allowed themselves to be visually impaired to the role of women (Miller, 2002), relegating less masculine roles, such as organizing and facilitating, negotiating, and surveying (Harding, 2014). As a result, women are seen as adjunct to the “real” gang members and their role is frequently obscured, downplayed, and backgrounded. It is perhaps credible to argue that all gangs are mixed, with varying roles allocated, undertaken, and preferred by different people, which in some cases remain differentiated by gender (see Peterson, Carson, & Fowler, 2018). By reorienting the debate and framing this differently, the roles of women, both at the gang core and on its periphery, might be demystified and rendered less opaque; hence the current study.

### *Gender, Offending, and Victimization in Gangs*

Some reports have suggested that gang involvement increases the risk for females to become involved in serious crime (as it does for males, see Pyrooz, McGloin, & Decker, 2017), including playing significant roles in violence and drug dealing, as a means of gaining status and esteem (Batchelor, 2009; Miller & Decker, 2001). Other reports suggest that females commit the same variety of offenses as boys but at a slightly lower

frequency (Esbensen, Peterson, Taylor, & Freng, 2010). Conversely, several tranches of evaluation data in the United States have indicated that females report proportionally lower involvement in violent crime than their male counterparts (Bjerregaard, 2002; Haymoz & Gatti, 2010) and correspondingly are often at a reduced risk of homicide as there are fewer expectations for their involvement in firearms incidents or drug distribution (Gover, Jennings, & Tewksbury, 2009; Miller & Decker, 2001). When embedded in majority-male gangs versus all- or majority-female gangs, however, women exhibit much higher delinquency rates (Peterson et al., 2001), perhaps owing to peer influence. Hunt and Joe-Laidler (2001) argue that women in “auxiliary” gangs are more subject to “violence-prone situations” than those in independent gangs; whereas the former confront potential violence both inside and outside the gang, the latter only have to deal with the threat of violence outside the gang and are protected by their “homegirls” (Moore, 1991).

Victimization is a common theme in the literature on female gang involvement. The majority of U.K.-based gang research (cf. Batchelor, 2009; Harding, 2014), for example, has presented the female experience as one characterized by “subordination and abuse,” with gang rape often used as a weapon by males and/or social status and enhanced protection offered to young women who engage in sexual activity with their male counterparts (Densley, Davis & Mason, 2013; Disley & Liddle, 2016; Young & Trickett, 2017). This perspective is succinctly captured by HM Government’s (2016) rebranding of their gang strategy from “Ending Gangs and Youth Violence” to “Ending Gang Violence and Exploitation,” and a renewed focus on “contextual safeguarding” of abused young women (Firmin, 2018).

In the United States, in both Miller’s (2008) and Valdez’s (2007) research, it was found that young women of color often found themselves exposed to a male gang culture that endorses male dominance and control of women’s bodies and demands submissiveness, leading Valdez to conclude that gangs are “patriarchal microcosms” that punish those who violate gender norms (Young & Trickett, 2017, p. 232). While such findings might confirm male privilege, they also obscure female agency.

Insight into female involvement with gangs has frequently followed male gendered perspectives, suggesting a deficit model for gang affiliation and engagement. More recently, however, fresh perspectives argue that female gang affiliation is much more “agentic” than previously thought (Bandura, 2001). For example, Moore and Hagedorn (2001) argue that the gang is often seen as a refuge for disadvantaged young women who are experiencing family-based sexual violence and domestic abuse, which is widely reported in the life histories of female gang members (e.g., Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995; Moore, 1991). Likewise, gang membership can be viewed as an “assertion of independence” (Moore & Hagedorn, 2001, p. 3) from family and from cultural and class constraints. In this way, the gang offers agentic reempowerment, albeit limited, because many gangs involve kinship ties and joining a gang is often viewed as a logical step for neighborhood youth because the “social field” that the gang operates in has such propinquity to the local community (Harding, 2014). Joining the gang, in turn, becomes normative and logical (Densley, 2015).

Positioning and status within a gang structure is another issue explored in the female gang literature. Harding (2014) argues that while male gang members advance up the gang hierarchy by acquiring “street capital” based upon violence, female gang members do so via a different form of street capital, earned via social skill. This more agentic perspective implies women can take back control of how they are viewed and treated by others in the gang. Indeed, a woman’s status within the gang often determines whether or not she will be subject to forced sex with the male gang members (Miller, 2001). Where women are seen as “tokens” within the context of male-dominated street gangs, evidence suggests that they may attempt to adopt “honorary male” status, but when they belong to more gender-balanced gangs they may have a greater ability to “affect the culture of the group” (Miller & Brunson, 2000, p. 421).

Some scholarship draws attention to the fact that some young women who adopt “masculine attributes” through participating in delinquent and violent activity may increase the likelihood of violent victimization because they come to be regarded as “weaker” than their male counterparts (Gover et al., 2009, p. 106). Others also suggest that women may be at greater risk of being victimized through the experience of gang initiation, conflicts with men in rival gangs, and with other women in both their own and rival gangs (Gover et al., 2009; Laidler & Hunt, 2001). Laidler and Hunt (2001) suggest that females are routinely subjected to the male gaze within gangs; they are often treated as “possessions” by males (Moore & Hagedorn, 2001, p. 3), and continually made aware of the “gendered nature of the streets” (Laidler & Hunt, 2001, p. 676). In addition, some evidence suggests that female gang members tend to target other women as victims who are less likely to fight back, and that they manipulate men by appearing “sexually available or working with male partners” (Laidler & Hunt, 2001, p. 676; see also, Miller & Decker, 2001).

### *Masculinity, Femininity, Motherhood, and Disengagement*

The wider gang literature has repeatedly asserted the importance of neighborhood space and the way in which

knowledge and use of that space within the context of gangs is crucial for young men in enabling the reassertion of marginalized masculinity (e.g., Anderson, 1999; Miller, 1958; Thrasher, 1927; Deuchar, 2009; Densley, 2013; Harding, 2014). Against this backdrop, Miller (2002) has argued that “gender crossing” sometimes occurs whereby young women heavily identify with the young men in their gangs and construct themselves as “one of the guys” (p. 443). However, Messerschmidt (2002) disputes this, arguing instead that young women tend to construct a form of “bad girl femininity” (p. 463). Furthermore, Laidler and Hunt’s (2001) earlier insights suggest that girls’ participation in gangs offers an avenue for challenging normative gender roles and asserting “emphasized femininity” (p. 658; Connell, 1987), whereby a particular notion of femininity constructed as the “bad girl” is promoted. In enacting this form of “bad girl femininity,” young women operating within the patriarchal power structure of gangs gain a form of status through, for instance, resorting to violence to defend their sense of honor (Young & Trickett, 2017, p. 235).

Laidler and Hunt (2001) also argue that, for some women, “looking bad” (as opposed to “being bad”) is seen as a protective strategy within the patriarchal environment of the street and a means of demonstrating a sense of power in an environment that provides them with “little status” (p. 676). For some, societal reaction to their portrayal as “bad girls” turns out to be even more problematic than for their male counterparts because these women challenge traditional gender roles (Hunt & Joe-Laidler, 2001). At the same time, evidence gathered in London by Harding (2014) suggests that young women often find themselves at the bottom of a competitive “social field” that privileges men and will acknowledge their weakened position.

Some research has explored the way in which young female gang members negotiate their sense of femininity still further when they experience the transition to motherhood. For instance, Maloney et al. (2011) conducted interviews with 65 female gang members in San Francisco and found that motherhood entailed a retreat from the street and a renewed emphasis on time spent at home; although they had previously resisted normative femininity while gang members, having children meant that they became obliged to accept some elements of “traditional femininity” (p. 4). In such cases, Maloney et al. argue that the drive toward maintaining respect as a gang girl begins to conflict with the need to maintain respect as a good mother, whereby the pursuit of autonomy is no longer tied to wanting to be on the street but linked to a new desire to feel independent from others in her ability to raise a child. As Pyrooz et al. (2017) have highlighted, parenthood is a “dramatic life event” that offers the opportunity to forge strong bonds, develop a stake in conformity, and promote changes in identity (p. 871).

Several studies across the United States have illustrated that, for female members, motherhood and pregnancy are cited as the primary reason for exiting the gang although some researchers have questioned the robustness of these findings (for review, see Pyrooz et al., 2017). Reflecting on these insights, Pyrooz et al. (2017) hypothesize that, as a young woman’s capacity to back up fellow members or respond to threats of violence may be significantly hampered if she is taking care of a child, motherhood may diminish the instrumental value girls offer the gang, which can help to “signal” an identity transformation away from the “gang member” label (p. 874; see Densley & Pyrooz, 2017).

## **The Current Study**

There has clearly been much written about the way in which gender shapes gang involvement, the way in which young women construct a gendered gang identity, and what may enable them to exit gangs both in the United States and in the United Kingdom. However, there has been a paucity of comparative gang research (Klein, 2005), especially qualitative research that explores the nuances of women’s gang involvement from an inclusive transatlantic perspective. As it has been argued, no two gangs are alike in “form and function” (Densley, 2013, p. 5) and one cannot subsume the distinctive cultural orientations, historical trajectories, and meanings of gangs in different geographical locations into a “singular construction” (Fraser, 2013, p. 981). Accordingly, there is a need for new research that explores the voices and experiences of young women from both sides of the Atlantic and from the perspective of particularly salient urban contexts.

## **Method**

As part of wider qualitative research into the processes of gang disengagement and criminal desistance in Los Angeles, United States (Deuchar, 2018), a smaller substudy emerged focusing on the particular experiences and perspectives of female gang members in the city. Combined with this, as part of a simultaneous qualitative study of gangs and organized crime in Scotland (McLean, 2017), a second substudy emerged that was focused on the nature of young women’s involvement in gangs in Glasgow (Scotland’s largest city). As a transatlantic team, we were subsequently able to combine these two qualitative data sets to create a comparative analysis of young women’s initial motivation for gang membership, their activity within gang contexts, how they

negotiated and upheld gender roles, and (where relevant) what stimulated their initial decisions to exit.

We chose to compare these issues within the context of Los Angeles and Glasgow because of their differing and in some ways contrasting sociocultural contexts and particular histories with gang-related issues. In the most socially deprived communities of Los Angeles, around 90% of the population are either Latino and/or African American, whereas in Glasgow, less than 10% of those living in the most deprived communities are non-White. While the county and city of Los Angeles has at times been described as the “gang capital” of the United States, with a history of gang violence spanning the better part of a century (Vigil, 1988), the earliest recorded gangs in Glasgow date back to the late 19th century (Deuchar, 2009). While the history of gang culture and the nature of the violence associated with it is different in the two cities (with a predominance of firearms incidents in LA, compared with knife-related incidents in Glasgow), the two settings have suffered from a process of deindustrialization that has disadvantaged the working class. In the case of Los Angeles, Blacks and Latinos from socially disadvantaged neighborhoods have been particularly marginalized (Vigil, 1988), while in homogeneous Glasgow, gang culture involves predominantly the White working class (Fraser, 2015).

We recognized the challenges associated with gang definitions and the inherent difficulty with attempting to identify precise numbers of female members of gangs in specific locations. However, with regard to Los Angeles, in recent years it has been reported that all-female gangs are on the rise in the city, while female participation and fully fledged membership within male- dominant gangs has also been escalating (National Gang Intelligence Center, 2013). In Glasgow, reports have also suggested that there are increasing numbers of young women reported as having involvement in gang-related violence and criminality and also becoming victims of sexual exploitation (Batchelor, 2009)

The site for the data collection in Los Angeles was *Homeboy Industries*, an internationally recognized nonprofit organization focused on offering rehabilitative and employment-related services for formerly incarcerated and/or gang-involved persons across an 18-month period. Through drawing on the support of gatekeepers within the organization to facilitate access, in- depth semistructured interviews were conducted with a total of 16 participants. Five of these were young women who could be described at the time of the data collection process taking place as “reforming” gang members on the threshold or early stages of change (Healy, 2010). The age-range of the women spanned between early 20s and early 40s at the time that the interviews took place, and they were each at different stages in the 18-month *Homeboy Industries* program when they were interviewed (some near the beginning, others further on or near completion). All of them had been born and raised in the most socially disadvantaged communities of Los Angeles, and all were from ethnic minority backgrounds. More specifically, when asked how they would describe their ethnicity, three referred to themselves as being of Mexican descent, one as African American, and one other as mixed race (with an Italian/German mother and Mexican father). The first author was initially introduced to all the staff and reforming gang members during one of the daily early-morning meetings held at *Homeboy Industries*. He subsequently met with the program mentors and their assigned trainees and sought volunteers to participate in interviews. Individual interviews lasting between 60 and 70 min were then conducted in small meeting rooms within the *Homeboy Industries* complex.

In Glasgow, participants were accessed via community-based outreach projects with frontline practitioners acting as gatekeepers. Difficulties accessing “hard-to-reach populations” and related biases (McLean, 2017) necessitated subsequent “snowball sampling,” wherein initial interviewees recommended known (ex)-offenders who met the inclusion criteria of having current or previous involvement in gang-related criminality. This combined purposive and snowball technique, common in studies of gangs and criminal networks (e.g., Densley, 2013), yielded a total sample of 47 interviewees, eight of whom were female gang members. The women identified as indigenous residents of Scotland and were aged 16 to 35 years. All were raised in Glasgow housing “schemes,” characterized by high levels of deprivation (see Scottish Government, 2012). In-depth semistructured interviews typically lasted 1 hr.

Interviews were recorded via audio devices before being transcribed, coded, and analyzed thematically. Ethical approval was granted by the first and third authors’ home institution. Prior to interviews, an information sheet outlining relevant information was distributed and informed consent sought from all participants. In the sections that follow, the emerging themes are presented and key quotations emerging from interviews highlighted. For confidentiality reasons, pseudonyms are used when referring to participants throughout.

## Findings

### *Disadvantage and Preparation for Gang Life*

Central to the biographies of participants was how each female interviewed had grown up in an area of multiple

disadvantage and poverty. In many cases, localized and domestic violence had become normalized alongside the presence of the street gang. The women in Los Angeles all described a range of difficult family circumstances they encountered while growing up. These were very often characterized by drug addiction within the family home, domestic violence, missing father-figures and maternal neglect due to rejection or addiction:

My parents were gang members and heroin addicts, so it was the lifestyle that I was born into. It wasn't normal . . . my dad used to beat my mom daily . . . they were both addicted so I seen a lot of violence. (*Camila, Los Angeles*)

I grew up in a gang-infested, drug-infested community. My mother was an addict. My father was a heroin addict, he'd never been in the picture . . . my mom . . . she was still a good mom, but like her drug use, she wasn't able to put her all into parenting. (*Mariana, Los Angeles*)

For Kelly, who had a mixed-racial background, her childhood was characterized by having a father in prison and normative domestic violence:

My father was in prison—I didn't get to know him. And my mother was raised in the military, so she was a military daughter. She was a very outspoken woman—mean, strong, a violent lady . . . and gangster too . . . so she raised us, and my four siblings, we're all from different fathers . . . my mother would drink a lot . . . one time, my mom bust my head open . . . she hit me in the head “boom,” hard, with buckles. You know, old fashioned buckles . . . I still have the scar. (*Kelly, Los Angeles*)

The Scottish participants likewise shared similar upbringings of poverty and disadvantage, characterized by disruption, reordered family units, and parental figures who either significantly rejected their parental duties or could not fulfill them sufficiently. Marie's home life was typical of other participants, and like other participants, she contributed significantly in the upbringing of younger siblings:

My mother never kept well . . . my dad, well dad was never around. It was hard, man . . . pure hard, kind of fell on me to bring up my [younger siblings] . . . I was, kind of, like their mum . . . mum was there but couldn't do all the practical things [be]cause her illness. Was pure hard, that shit. Getting [my younger siblings] ready for school, mak[ing] dinner . . . was hard, but they respect me for it. (*Marie, Glasgow*)

Through such experiences, women quickly learned what was required to survive and advance in a social field governed by multiple disadvantages. Vigil (2007) highlights the way in which conflictual or dysfunctional home relationships, domestic violence, and abuse may further the allure of gang membership. It could be viewed that the street gang therefore offers women a variety of alternative joining narratives—for some, gang affiliation will be a *way out* of past experiences; for others, gang affiliation will be a *way in* (i.e., past experiences have normalized this existence to the extent that entering the gang appears a normative step); and for still others, gang affiliation will be viewed as a *way up* to social mobility (often these women are more agentic and view the gang as means to advance).

While being raised in disruptive households and from difficult backgrounds were perceived by the majority of participants in both sample sites as contributing significantly to early interaction with offending, this was not the case for all. Two of the Scottish participants described what they termed rather “privileged” upbringings. Neither difficult financial/material circumstances nor circumstances of differential association brought about offending in these women's cases. Rather, it was physical attraction to, and desire for, potential partners with a “bad boy” image:

Who doesn't like a bad boy? . . . I used to date [male gang member]. . . [when] I [discovered] he [sold drugs], he stopped hiding [his activities] from me and just [stored drugs] in the house. I didn't like it . . . and was scared the police would arrest me . . . [after] we split, [I had] bills, so [female gang member A] seen me and [asked] if I would hold like her own gear [in exchange for income]. . . she paid me £100 every week at first . . . [and] always [bought] me stuff as well like wallpaper [for] the hall and bedroom. (*Kim, Glasgow*).

In this scenario, Kim had already determined that advancement in the neighborhood social field was best accomplished by partnering with someone who knows how it all works—a Bad Boy. A Bad Boy represents a male with an existing reputation and acknowledged status who understands the operative rules of the field and will provide both short-term and long-term advantage in navigating the landscape of the social field.

## *Points of Entry Into the Gang*

The participant biographies illustrate differing points of entry into the gang. Points of entry and method of entry into gang affiliation will subsequently determine one's position in the gang hierarchy and whether it is elevated or subordinate. The gendered nature of the social field suggests most women take up a subordinate position upon gang entry (i.e., they enter via a deficit model). For the American women in the sample, for example, early family challenges led them to regard local neighborhood gang members as surrogate family, but in some cases still had to be "jumped in" by the men to become accepted (Leap, 2012):

When I was 13 I started ditching school. And I met some people from a gang, and so I ran away from the house . . . I was just living in the streets with some gang members. The guys I used to hang around with, they told me that . . . if I didn't jump in the gang, they wouldn't be able to help me. And I thought that they were my family. I felt good around them, thinking that they were like my friends, my brothers . . . for 13 seconds they were hitting me . . . [and] then joined me into the gang. (*Nicole, Los Angeles*)

The young women who were "jumped in" or "sexed in" described being viewed as accessing the gang via a deficit route and typically went on to develop trajectories within the gang, which commenced from a much lower hierarchical position and were slower to advance. This made them vulnerable to further victimization and presented a longer and harder route to climb to any recognizable or valued status.

Other deficit routes into gang affiliation included drug or financial debt. A point of entry that involves partnering with a Bad Boy gives the illusion of a higher point of entry into the gang hierarchy, but in reality, this was fragile and heavily determined upon the relationship enduring. In Scotland, for example, Kim's involvement in criminal activity was one that was initially developed via a sexual relationship with a known male gang member. After their relationship broke down, however, outstanding financial commitments (i.e., debts he had incurred in her name such as car finance, loans, etc.) meant Kim was in little position to refuse financial assistance from a female gang leader who had befriended her in exchange for continuing to allow her home to be used to store drugs.

An alternative, more agentic route into gang affiliation for our sample was that of entering via kinship ties. This route involved being "brought in" to the gang via family ties and was more prevalent in Scotland. For example, Marie, who led a sophisticated family-orientated gang structure, simply viewed gang activity as "providing for the family":

I don't really like [being involved in drug distribution] . . . [but] everything I do is for them (Marie's younger siblings) . . . and the good of the family. They know that. [I] got into this line of work through [Uncle X] . . . I had always looked after my wee brothers but after changes in the [welfare system] we literally were finding it hard to put a roof over our head. . . . [Uncle X] helped us out . . . if he had been into fixing cars, that would have been [what we done], just drugs was [what uncle X did] . . . Initially, we stashed whatever, after a while you get to know the game. [We] would cut and do wraps, progressed from there . . . I needed help . . . so . . . employed [my younger siblings]. (*Marie, Glasgow*)

Unlike Nicole's experiences in Los Angeles, joining a gang in Scotland was much more akin to "street socialization" (Vigil, 1988) via family rather than undergoing any official initiation ritual. Importantly, in Scotland, while females were very much involved in gangs, from sexual relationships to criminal activities, in some cases leading gang structures with a clearly defined hierarchy, Scottish participants seldom, if at all, applied the label "gang member" to themselves. While the U.S. participants frequently referred to themselves as being "gang members" or involved in "gang" activity, in Scotland female participants used terms like "the business," "this line of work," and "employed." McLean (2017) argues this lack of gang terminology often results in what would be defined as gang structures in other contexts, such as the United States, to go unrecognized in Scotland. Local language and linguistics render "gang" labels being applied almost exclusively to what are recreational youth groups involved in street fighting, and accordingly, those involved in acquisitive crimes often find themselves undefined.

Still, kinship entry offers considerable network support for female entrants, marking them as off-limits sexually for most other males. The point of entry is therefore not a deficit model but a "credit model," suggesting they have been vetted and considered skilled, trustworthy, and valuable for business. Such female entrants thus experienced a different, more advantageous trajectory within the gang, which validates and releases their agency, permitting a faster rise to the top.

## *Gender Negotiation, Hierarchical Position, and Status*

Existing research finds the social field of the street gang is highly gendered, privileging males, valorizing

violence, and disadvantaging women. Females are often consigned to lower hierarchical positions, making them vulnerable to victimization. Yet, while gang membership was seen to enhance status and respect on the streets, how status was expressed and acquired varied quite differently between participants in either site. In Los Angeles, while some women felt respected and readily embraced by the men, others believed they had to work harder than their male counterparts to become accepted. Some female members engaged in stereotypically male gang pursuits, such as violent gang feuds, robberies, and automobile theft. This illustrates different forms of female agency and generation of street capital. Each female participant listed below indicates a level of gang embeddedness and ability (if not a requirement) to operate within normative gang rules and expected behaviors:

[My brother] was killed by the rival gang . . . in the neighborhoods, over there it's like racial. Blacks don't get along with Mexicans . . . So he got killed by the Black neighborhood . . . when they killed him, I went out, like for revenge. The best way to avenge the death of your family member is by becoming violent . . . you have a certain street, from a certain street to a certain street, that's our 'hood. So if a Black comes into our 'hood then it's time to kill. (*Olivia, Los Angeles*)

I fought every day of my high school year . . . every single day I was in some kind of altercation, there was not a day that I didn't put a hand on somebody for the gang . . . my first strong-armed robbery was with my mom when I was 14. In the beginning it was easy . . . selling drugs, getting high, doing robberies, doing whatever I had to do. (*Camila, Los Angeles*)

Stealing cars became my addiction . . . and I would just steal cars, sell the parts. And then in 2005 when I was 15 I was in a high speed chase, [and involved in a subsequent collision] running from the cops . . . [It was] a really bad accident . . . as soon as I got better . . . I started fighting [again]. (*Nicole, Los Angeles*)

However, while the U.S. participants engaged in activities typically affiliated with male gang membership, this was not the case in Scotland. Scottish participants described being present while their male counterparts undertook such behavior; they did not make explicit mention to being actively involved. Engaging in “gender crossing” (Miller, 2002, p. 443) or “bad girl femininity” (Messerschmidt, 2002, p. 463) for gang status, it would seem, was largely consigned to the U.S. participants. This is perhaps an indication of the embedded nature of the LA gang social field with increased competition for status. Scottish participants instead embraced more “traditional” forms of femininity (Maloney et al., 2011, p. 4) and felt that status was somewhat intertwined with normative femininity and male desirability. However, like their U.S. counterparts, the Scottish participants were very much involved in drug supply, indicating that roles in drug supply are readily available to female gang affiliates.

McLean, Densley & Deuchar (2017) note that, in recent decades, gang literature and drug literature are becoming intrinsically interwoven with gang membership. It was also common for our female participants to regularly have engaged in drug-supply chains:

It's like you have connections to all kinds of drugs . . . whatever, any kind of drug—because you have connections . . . that's how it gets distributed, we're the smaller source, we're the ones out on the street . . . but you get it by the quantity . . . I had a lot of friends that were, you know, that had a lot of big amounts. (*Olivia, Los Angeles*)

Yet, dealing often meant that increased access to a range of illicit substances ultimately led on to a range of addictions to the very commodities they sold, that is, marijuana, crack cocaine, crystal meth, and heroin. This became a repetitive cycle of behavior that continued to fuel their offending behavior:

I started doing drugs at 10 years old . . . like PCP . . . but I couldn't find the drug that I liked. When I found the one I liked I was like “woah.” It was meth, I loved it. I liked the way it made me feel, and it made me feel more important. . . it enhanced me forward, my thinking process . . . and with that I used it as power. (*Kelly, Los Angeles*)

Like much of the existing literature exploring female roles in drug supply, this study similarly found the majority of participants, on either site, to occupy low-level roles in the drug-supply chain: typically street-level dealing, renting their homes out for drug storage, or acting as a runner. However, contrary to portrayals of subordinate gang roles, subject to the male gaze (Laidler & Hunt, 2001; Young & Trickett, 2017), a few female participants played more agentic roles in supply and even operated at the top of hierarchical gang structures:

As I got older, I just wanted to be part of [the gang] and I said, “I'm gonna be the leader and I'm gonna be the best” . . . there were only a few women that started . . . two other ones and me . . . and it got big . . . I wanted to run it, and I did. .



. . . I was known as number one wherever I went . . . I started teaching LA gang members how to be gang members. (*Kelly, Los Angeles*)

Hutton (2005) acknowledges that women are more than capable of entering and maintaining participation in the hypermasculine dominated sphere of drug dealing. Nonetheless, she argues that it is a position that the female dealer must negotiate with particular care because a drug dealer's biological sex exposes her to victimization by aggressive and violent male competitors. As a consequence, it is rare for females to lead male-dominated gangs, structures, or networks involved in the supply of drugs. Kelly, it would seem, negotiated this sphere by starting an "independent" network primarily consisting of females. However, the Scottish participants Marie and Karen, who joined the gang via a credit-model point of entry, both operated at the top of male dominated gang structures and did so very differently to what Hutton suggests. Again, it appears, kinship and/or credit-model entry confer both agency and status that in turn determine and then chart a different trajectory for some women:

I am my own boss . . . Might get gear or E's (cocaine and ecstasy pills) from [uncle X] but that don't mean I work for him. I pay my dues like everyone else, and I sell to my own customers. Whatever profits made, its mine. . . 'course I split what is due to my [siblings], their mates, whatever . . . But rest is in my pocket . . . [uncle X] wouldn't even want me working for him fact, he doesn't roll that way with us. (*Marie, Glasgow*)

People think being a woman makes me weak . . . it actually probably gives me a better position than most . . . think about it, even though everyone knows I sell, they just can't see it. It's in their face . . . but it's like, "she's a woman, obviously there's a guy behind the scenes, somewhere. Got to be." You get me? But it isn't like that . . . I don't hide it, I want my clientele to know if they want anything then come to me, there isn't no one else. (*Karen, Glasgow*)

### *Gender Awareness and Agentic Renegotiation*

The women in our study were highly cognizant of their hierarchical position within the gang, but also mindful of their gender and where that placed them within the hierarchy. They were aware of the gender imbalance in the gang social field and were adept at recognizing and manipulating expected gender roles and stereotypes that assumed a dominant male role operating above them.

Hutton (2005) suggests that to climb the gang hierarchy, females typically overcome their precarious position by playing the role of puppet master or Keyser Söze (i.e., a feared, elusive person nobody has met, named after the main antagonist in the 1995 film, *The Usual Suspects*), whereby independent female dealers hide behind a self-constructed veneer of a male dealer operating above them. Yet, both Marie and Karen's statements would suggest that they actively embraced their positions as head of their respective criminal gangs and made little effort to conceal such positions. However, interestingly though, both confessed to playing Keyser Söze when they found themselves confronted by law enforcement and, in doing so, would play up gender expectations to present an image of their own victimization and exploitation. This suggests that not only do women recognize and acknowledge the gendered roles offered to them within the gang social field, but also they are, at times, able to agentially adapt, play, reverse, or control these roles if necessary to their advantage (determinant upon situation and interaction). This implies a form of "gendered" code-switching (Anderson, 1999), which plays into traditional feminine roles and stereotypes at times, but then permits other gendered roles to be adopted. This then becomes both a survival technique and a technique for gaining strategic advantage.

In choosing business strategies, Glasgow-based participant Karen suggested that females had a significantly advantageous position over rival male dealers and attributed this to issues of hypermasculinity. Suggesting that males, particularly those at the lower market levels of drug supply, felt a continual need to reassert their masculinity through violence, putting them in police crosshairs, she felt that being a female released her from this pressure and enabled her to view drug dealing solely as a business that allocated both finances and social standing:

I didn't just learn how to deal [successfully] off [my older brother, but] also learned what not to do, know? He was always in and out of jail. In [jail] right now (laughs). Usually, nine times out of ten, he gets the jail for fighting wi' people about drugs. See to be honest, he is too bravado to do this line of work. . . most of the guys I work wi' are full of the bravado. I don't have that problem being a woman . . . probably helps me stay focused and not get sidetracked into some guy, big balls, bull shit, of who is the toughest . . . for me it is just business. (*Karen, Glasgow*)

For Karen, a hypermasculine identity was not one that served drug dealers well but rather led to being "sidetracked." Hypermasculine identity largely characterized the wider sample of male participants in both Glasgow and Los Angeles. Most spoke of assaulting would-be rivals should they be shown the slightest disrespect or

default on outstanding drug debts. When drug supply became more than business and spilled over into the personal arena, there was a greater risk that violence would ensue, thus proving detrimental to business (McLean et al., 2017). Women with a more agentic business engagement with the gang appear therefore to be less distracted by the need to raise their street capital through violence.

This hypermasculinity among male drug dealers likewise hindered the likelihood of forming working partnerships with those female participants interviewed, should they perceive their own position as one of subordination. Even agentic women in the gang can come up against traditional gendered narratives when working with nonkinship gang members:

My [younger] brother's pals don't mind doing some work for them but I can see they aren't happy when I ask them "do this" or "do that." I can see they are looking at me like "you're a woman" . . . I don't have that problem with [my younger brothers] . . . But their pals, uft. Can be tricky . . . I mean, they do what I ask because they know it is going to benefit them. . . . but I can't be like "fucking get that done now." Got to remember, they are young boys and most haven't had women tell them to do nothing (*Marie, Glasgow*)

In Glasgow, women like Marie may have been able to relay orders directly to her younger siblings without any problematic issues or insubordination, but to negotiate the hypermasculine characteristics of those workers who did not share kinship, she resorted to having her brothers pass on instructions. More so when such instructions were contentious and likely not received as being personally beneficial to others. Such a decision illustrates the social skills adopted by some women to achieve their required outcome. It further illustrates an adaptive pragmatism oriented toward the rules of the gendered social field.

It is clear that kinship played a crucial role not only in gang formation but also the maintenance of gang structures and effective lines of communication in Glasgow. However, these lines of communication would, at times, break down among those in subordinate positions or unrelated through kinship, especially where females were in charge of managing and maintaining gang affairs. Clearly, such demands might not be tolerated and the rules of the gendered social field demand the status quo holds sway.

### *Victimization and Risk Management*

Previous literature has drawn attention to the way in which female gang members often become exposed to sexual victimization (Cepeda & Valdez, 2003), while some insights have also suggested that women's status within gangs tends to determine whether they will be subjected to forced sex with male gang members (Miller, 2001). The majority of the women in the Los Angeles sample never mentioned sex as playing a role in their gang involvement, and seemed to have the ability to develop gang status via accumulating street capital in their own right (Harding, 2014). However, Nicole did allude to the fact that she was subjected to violent victimization when she began dating a rival gang member, and that she had to disguise her sense of normative femininity to stifle any sexual advances from fellow gang members:

When I got out of camp I was 17 . . . [I] went back to the 'hood and the same gang members that I used to hang around with. They sent me to the hospital because they gave me a messed up beating . . . because I started dating. Well, I met this guy from another 'hood . . . Sometimes the guys get mad because, like if the main one that is running the gang, if he likes you and you're not willing to be with him or nothin', that's when . . . there's problems . . . and especially if they find out you're with somebody from another 'hood . . . I wanted to still be active in my gang but still be wi' him . . . and then I shaved, then I will dress like a man so that my guys from the 'hood, they wouldn't like me or I wouldn't be attractive to them. (*Nicole, Los Angeles*)

Only this one member of the Los Angeles sample referred to a feeling of vulnerability within the context of "mixed-gender" gangs that led to the continued need to stifle unwanted sexual advances. It is likely that infringement of adopted gang rules will be more strictly enforced upon subordinates and females. Others were clearly able to exert personally earned criminal distinction through accumulating street capital and to continue to command respect from local gang-affiliated men (Harding, 2014; Deuchar, 2018).

Our data suggest that sexual exploitation among female gang members may not always be as prevalent as previously thought. Rather, victimization came in other forms of exploitation, violence, or being relegated to a secondary status. In Glasgow, Karen argued that within drug dealing activity, the risk of victimization is equally high and is not dependent upon one's sex:

You think 'cause I'm a woman, I am vulnerable (laughs), fuck sake come on you! Get real . . . if someone is going to rob a dealer, then they are going to rob a dealer regardless of who they are. Doesn't matter if they are male or female. Think of it this way. If you (referring to researcher) were going to rob a drug dealer you would make sure you are all tooled up (armed), and you would wait and jump [attack] the [drug dealer] when they are off guard. . . . Aye I would agree wi' you that women would be more vulnerable to like a sex attacker or that, but that's 'cause the woman has something the guy wants. It's no[t] like that with drug dealing, 'cause [both] guys and women dealers have what the attacker wants, don't they? (*Karen, Glasgow*)

As Karen indicated, gender is given little consideration for would-be attackers who seek to rob drug dealers. Karen attributed this to the fact that what the robber seeks to gain is the commodities of drugs or finances. Yet she did agree that when the attacker is committing an offense that is sexually motivated, then a woman is at greater risk of victimization than a man. Karen highlighted that the deciding factor that increases risks of victimization is opportunity. For example, agreeing to sell drugs to unknown individuals, alone, or in unknown locations, or carrying large sums of money are all factors that increase the likelihood of being victimized. Therefore, the risk of victimization is largely dependent upon the business model or business strategy deployed by gang-related dealers. Marie notes below how the need to assess risk is recognized and she comments upon the importance of reducing victimization via business strategies:

Anyone can get attacked (robbed), it happens to [male drug dealers] all the time. It's just one of them risks [involved with] doing this type of [work] . . . You definitely need to be on your guard . . . People are always looking to rip you off. No' even like just rob you, but to steal from you and all . . . [occasionally customers] will maybe ask for tick, or even run up big bills man, then no' pay or no' answer your [mobile phone] calls . . . Try to blank (ignore or avoid) you. . . I set limits on tick bills . . . Aye, I need to work with people I don't really know from time to time, but need to be smart about it, like no[t] too trusting . . . Regardless, [of potential profits] I only work with people that other [trusted friends] can vouch for. (*Marie, Glasgow*)

Part of that risk assessment is assessing new partners. Marie acknowledged that as part of operating a successful business that is constantly looking to expand, she was required to work in partnership with new business associates, or even deal with new customers. Yet, to reduce levels of risk, she required that those individuals could be vouched for by her trusted associates and regular business partners.

However, with regard to the hierarchical positions held within gangs, Scottish participants Karen and Marie were very much the exception and not the rule because other female participants had experienced exploitation to some degree. Participant Kay's fiancé ran a drugs operation, and covered such proceeds by laundering money via a local ice-cream business, and as his partner, she would "cook" drugs, pay legitimate bills in her name, and also store drugs in the family home. Despite playing a significant role in the business, she had little direct access to finances or any knowledge of larger incomings and outgoings. This suggests a more typical gendered role and division of labor:

Michael always had money, but he never gave me anything, he didn't trust women with money. Michael would never tell me [how much he earned] . . . we probably would spend about £100 a day on eating out, easy . . . and [he] probably [spent] around £300 a week on shoes, clothes, that stuff. [He] bought new trainers every week. (Kay, Glasgow)

Despite recently separating, Kay's ex-partner still expected her to help as before, yet had severed all financial commitments to her or their children. Other Scottish participants like Stephanie, much like Kim, had been exploited to store drugs in their homes by their criminal partners. However, Stephanie's sister, Lorna, sought to help relieve this burden from her sister and agreed to act as a drugs runner and make collections/drop-offs instead:

I'm no mug but, I didn't like what he was doing with Steph [be]cause she wanted none of that going on under her roof, but me, I don't mind, I needed the money [anyway] . . . Steph[anie's] [Partner Z] was too hot (known to police) to do [collections]. (*Lorna, Glasgow*)

It is interesting to note that the only case of sexual exploitation to occur within either sample group in fact came from female participant Marie. She described how she would "put out" other females who owed drug debts to sell themselves for sex, with her younger male sibling acting as a pimp:

Don't get me wrong, they do come up short sometimes . . . I'm no' that harsh, give a warning. [Sibling A] might tax them but no' like interest. Fuck, even puts the girls out to work if it's a good bit . . . only till debts paid. . . . wouldn't do that to like anyone, but [they are] smackheads (heroin addicts) . . . its nothing to them. (*Marie, Glasgow*)

Again, this example offers an alternative narrative regarding women's involvement in the sexual exploitation of other women. Previous scholarship suggests that women might direct men to exploit other women by way of a survival strategy so that the women can avoid victimization or exploitation herself. Here, however, alongside strong neutralizing narratives is the motivation of financial return.

### *Disengagement From Gangs*

Regarding the Scottish sample, most were still active offenders by the time the interviews took place. On the contrary, those in Los Angeles were accessed via a rehabilitation program and thus discussed the "turning points" (Pyrooz et al., 2017) that had led to their initial decisions to disengage from gangs. Several of the women in Los Angeles described the way in which they had given birth while still involved in gangbanging. While Olivia, among others, admitted that she had taken her daughter out with her on the streets, Camila actively resisted involving her son in gang-related behavior and instead opted to leave him with his father:

I was still out there when I had my daughter . . . I did used to take my daughter with me, you know, over there. I mean, I tried not to, but I mean if you're in that circle, no matter where you're at there's always gonna be something. (*Olivia, Los Angeles*)

I'd never drag my son with me . . . I couldn't have taken him with me and in the street and doing what I was doing . . . he didn't have no place there. I remember when I was growing up I used to see a lot of young girls . . . their kids would be right there with us and I didn't like it. They're kids, they don't run a business right here. So that's what I say when people tell me, "oh no, you fucked up, you left your son." No, I love my son enough to know better . . . so he was raised with his dad. (*Camila, Los Angeles*)

Whether they had involved their children in their gang lifestyles or not, most of the women in Los Angeles agreed that it was parenthood that ultimately created a turning point in their lives and inspired them to begin to reconsider their criminal lifestyles:

Everything started hitting me, like real hard . . . like, I didn't have no support, my kids don't have no support . . . like, I need to change. And I guess that's when I made the decision, like I need to get my shit together. Like I really need to work on me because what would I do if my kids end up in the system? . . . I just couldn't bear the thought of, like my kids don't deserve this. (*Mariana, Los Angeles*)

When I started losing houses, and when I didn't do my proper work anymore and my kids were getting big, when they started getting big they started acting like me. And that's when I said, "wait a minute" . . . see, I can handle the streets but these are rookies, you know? They're my kids, you know, I don't want nothing to happen to them. (*Kelly, Los Angeles*)

As McNeill, Farrall, Lightowler, and Maruna (2012) have argued, a period of "reflection and reassessment of what is important to the individual" is a common feature of the initial process of desistance (p. 6). Maruna (2001) argues that the generative commitment associated with parenthood can be an important *pull* factor that acts as a turning point that stimulates dedication toward desistance. It could be argued that Mariana's and Kelly's overwhelming *pull* factors were related to their "feared self" concerning parenthood (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009, p. 1103). They were evidently beginning to realize that continuing with offending lifestyles could have an adverse effect on their children, and feared them entering into offending lifestyles themselves. However, initial commitment to desistance actions among gang members can also be related to accompanying *push* factors, such as witnessing violent incidents, becoming a victim of violence, or suffering the trauma of real or potential loss (Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule, 2014; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Several of the women in Los Angeles also described the experience of losing their fellow "homies" to the violence or generally had become weary of the life-style. Some even had felt some of the anger that had driven their offending behavior begin to subside, as Olivia alluded to when she talked about the way in which she no longer wanted to seek revenge on her brother's killer:

At the end of the day what I wanted to not feel was all that in here [*points to heart*]. 'Cause it was a lot of anger, it was just . . . too heavy for me . . . I didn't wanna to be out there, I didn't wanna go do more damage and go out there and be crazy . . . losing somebody that's your blood and everything is very, very traumatic and very, very hurtful . . . I mean, I was 13 years old when my brother died. But I ultimately don't have the same hate that I had for that person (*Olivia, Los Angeles*)

Pregnancy and gang disengagement remains underresearched (Pyrooz et al., 2017); however, it is evident that antinatal activities reengages some women with alternative social fields of health, well-being, and social welfare. While motherhood is in no way a guarantee of gang disengagement, under certain circumstances exposure to these alternative social fields operates as an opportunity for gradual disengagement while offering an alternative yet mapped trajectory to exit.

## **Discussion**

The present study has presented a comparative perspective on female gang life, which sheds light on how gender is both negotiated and performed in different situational contexts and permits insight into the agency of women within a highly gendered social field. As with any exploratory, qualitative study, there are limits to the generalizability of findings. Still, in both Los Angeles and Glasgow, our sample grew up in neighborhoods characterized by multiple marginality (Vigil, 1988). Differential association, cultural transmission, and street socialization had positioned young women within the “pool of availability” for gang affiliation. Joining a gang was normative and logical. Normative levels of street and domestic violence desensitized many women and dissuaded them from taking agentic roles, suggesting many accept subordinate roles in the street gang. Even those who came from more privileged backgrounds saw that their future trajectory was best accomplished by partnering with “Bad Boys” who already knew how the gang game was played.

One unique finding, however, was that the method and point of entry into the gang was particularly important for our female respondents, determining not only how they were viewed, categorized, and perceived by men, but also how they were positioned within the street gang hierarchy. Two key models of entry emerged from the data. The first was a deficit model of entry linked to drugs and debt. This conferred a lower status and lower starting point on the hierarchy. Women who were “jumped in” or “sexed in” to the gang, for example, were viewed as having little to offer and they had to build street capital to survive or prove themselves. Those entering via partnering with a “Bad Boy,” moreover, were protected for as long as the relationship lasted, after which they became vulnerable because their status was intimately tied to just one individual, making their position tenuous.

A more robust method of gang entry was the credit-model where women were considered to bring social skill, expertise, and agency into the gang. This most frequently happened not only via kinship entry (an existing link to a family member), but also via a form of specialized “recruitment” (see Densley, 2015). Such entry conferred status and a higher entry point on the hierarchy. Women in credit considered themselves sexually unavailable, unhindered by debt, and strongly networked. The assumption was that they had “brought in” and they often went on to achieve higher positions of authority and status, albeit at times resorting to traditional gender roles to get things done (e.g., issuing orders to nonkin members). Even then, however, this might be viewed as an agentic use of “social skill” (Harding, 2014).

### *Implications for Future Research*

Method and point of entry for females into the street gang should not only determine one’s position within a gang structure, but also one’s “career” trajectory within it. This presents a series of testable hypotheses for future research. For example, those entering the gang via the deficit model will be assumed to be of lower status and vulnerable. Progress for these women will be slow and victimization is often assured. They will often need to generate street capital by employing a range of criminal strategies.

Those accessing the street gang via the credit-model, by contrast, should operate on a different trajectory. Extensive business or kinship networks will assist in widening their role and ensuring an upward trajectory that is faster than other women, but mostly still slower than men. Marie, for example, in Glasgow was introduced to the gang via her uncle and resolutely remains her own boss. Status must, however, be maintained and that might require the exploitation of other women in more subordinate roles. We encourage researchers to continue to grapple with questions of agency in gangs, especially as related to gender.

### *Implications for Practice*

The social field of the gang is highly gendered and privileges males, male personas, and male attributes. Females operating in the gang social field are subject to gendered competition not only from males but also competition from other females. Barriers and blockages are constantly erected by males to restrict female advancement. Thus, females operating with the gang social field are aware of these gendered restrictions much more so than men. They have developed a keener sense of their gender and how it can present limitations in the gang social field.

This *heightened gender awareness* has implications for practice. Female participants in our study all demonstrated a greater awareness of their gender than their male counterparts. They were aware of the positives and negatives assigned to them on account of operating within a gendered social field. While agency varied considerably among the women, most women were aware of having to play the gang game within rules set by men. Some, however, showed agentic skill at being able to upset or adapt these rules to their advantage. On occasion, this meant playing into gender stereotypes or gender-switching to adopt more masculine roles as a way of seeking advantage, avoiding risk, or survival.

Some gang-affiliated young women still conduct their lives partially in the social field of the gang and partially in the social field of the wider community. This suggests that their adherence to the rules of the gang social field is not as embedded or as all-encompassing as the gang males, and this potentially creates opportunities for intervention. Women use social skill that is transferable to be more adaptable to external social fields. Anderson (1999) refers to this ability as “code-switching”—essentially an ability to modify one’s presentation, demeanor, and interactions to pass as nongang-affiliated or as an ordinary community member when out in the wider community. This social skill can potentially be aligned with heightened gender-awareness to permit some socially skilled young women to gender code-switch. This means they can adapt their gendered persona to fit the need and the location of the moment. A form of gender “signaling” (Densley & Pyrooz, 2017), for example, allows women to inhabit their female persona more effectively to comply with or adhere to female stereotyped roles. This might be done for survival or advantage but when done consciously operates an agentic strategy. Indeed, one opportunity to create a different gang trajectory is via pregnancy. Pregnancy confers agency even upon the least agentic, offering opportunities of self-determination and disengagement if desired, consistent with recent studies in this area (e.g., Pyrooz et al., 2017).

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