EXPERIENCE-BASED LESSONS FROM MALES IN THE NORTHERN AREAS OF PORT ELIZABETH (GQEBERHA) ON FACTORS THAT PROTECTED THEM FROM BECOMING INVOLVED IN GANGSTERISM

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ABSTRACT

Despite the widespread prevalence of gangsterism and the predominantly male membership of gangs, some males residing and growing up in the Northern Areas of Port Elizabeth (Gqeberha), where gangsterism is so widespread, have never been involved in gangs. A qualitative study, explorative, descriptive and contextual in design, using semi-structured interviews as data-collection method, explored and described the experience-based lessons from selected males on factors that have protected them from gang involvement. Findings included family support, faith or religion, positive role models, education, participation in wholesome pursuits and involvement in sports as being amongst the factors that prevented participants against involvement in gang activities. Strategies to strengthen these protective factors and utilise them to design relevant programmes and interventions should now be investigated.

INTRODUCTION

Even though the phenomenon of gangsterism has been the topic of many research studies (Cooley, 2011; HURP, 2011; Jonas, 2015; Oliphant, 2013; Wilson, 2014; Wilson, 2013; Wolf, 2012), both internationally and locally, there are a limited number of published South African and international studies that examine the factors protecting males from becoming involved in gangsterism. Gangsterism in South Africa has been found to be more prevalent in so-called 'coloured' communities and predominantly amongst males. Existing research on gangsterism focuses mainly on the history and origin of gangsterism, risk factors that cause certain youths to become more vulnerable to gang involvement, and specific interventions aimed at curbing the phenomenon. Ward (2007) specifically states that if a person is exposed to more risk factors than protective factors, their chances of becoming involved in gangsterism also become higher in comparison to others who are not exposed to so many risk factors. In other words, if a person lives and grows up in a community where drugs or firearms are readily available, with high levels of poverty, unemployment, absence of meaningful jobs and social disorganisation, they are more at risk of becoming involved in gang-related activities than their counter parts in less affected circumstances (Ward, 2007). Despite the widespread existence of gangsterism and the predominantly male membership of gangs, some males residing and growing up in the northern areas of Port Elizabeth (Gqeberha), where gangsterism is so prevalent, have never been involved in gangs or gang-related activities. This study attempted to identify what protective factors played a role in buffering these males against becoming involved in gangsterism.

BACKGROUND

Gangsterism is rife in the Northern Areas of Port Elizabeth (Gqeberha), South Africa. Sporadic incidences of gang-related violence result in an increase in crimes such as murder, attempted murder, assault with grievous bodily harm, burglaries and illegal possession of firearms and drug-related cases. Statistics on the phenomenon of gangsterism are not readily available on the statistical records system of the South African Police Services but are compiled at the affected police stations for operational purposes (Eastern Cape Provincial Legislature, 2014:19).

According to a study conducted by the Helenvale Urban Renewal Programme (HURP), the first gang was formed in the Northern Areas in 1968 and named the 'Panga Boys' (HURP, 2011:2). Subsequent forced relocations from various Port Elizabeth suburbs declared as "Whites only" areas to areas such as Helenvale and Schauderville in the Northern Areas further contributed to the increase in gangs. Six years after the proclamation of the first municipal housing scheme, there were already five established gangs operating in the Northern Areas (HURP, 2011). Since then, gangsterism has continued to grow from generation to generation, contributing substantially to the stigmatisation of the Northern Areas, infamous for their gangs and for high levels of crime, poverty and unemployment, and low levels of education (HURP, 2011). By 2010, gangs such as the Paparazzis, Boomshakas, Blinkpen Boemelaars, Untouchables, Von Boeties and the Westsiders dominated the area, continuing a consistent trend of gang life (HURP, 2011). The trend of new gangs continuously emerging has had an enormous impact on the community. The impact includes territorial constraints on certain

people not being able to move around in areas where rival gangs are 'in control' of those specific areas, and family members being targeted due to their siblings' involvement in particular gangs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous articles have been written on the history and origins of gangsterism, both in an international and a South African context (Cooley, 2011; Gibson & Maringira, 2020; Hlatshwayo, 2018; HURP, 2011; Jonas, 2015; Nel, 2017; Oliphant, 2013; Standing, 2005; Wilson, 2014; Wilson, 2013; Wolf, 2012). Wolf (2012) writes about the history of violent crime and its steady increase in Central America over the past 20 years. She states that a key driver of crime in the region is the activity of street gangs (Wolf, 2012). A study by Cooley (2011) found that before the late 1950s the youth gang problem in Chicago was mainly a manifestation of the city's European ethnic communities. Black gangs were small-scale neighbourhood clans that, despite an occasional felony, were largely in the business of looking out for each other. In the 1960s larger and more ambitious gangs emerged, coinciding with the decline of the Chicago employment market for blacks, especially for young black men.

Gibson and Maringira (2020) highlighted the ways in which gang relationships are forged and maintained over time, especially in impoverished communities. They argue that even though gang relationships are sustained by violent mechanisms, they are also sources of alternative social and emotional support systems for gang members, who sometimes live in broken families (Gibson & Maringira, 2020). Mukwevho (2022) claimed that the absence of parents, inequalities in education and a lack of safety in schools are amongst the contributing factors to this phenomenon. Petrus (2021) also found that there were certain subcultures present in schools that co-existed with gangsterism. This subculture consisted of rival groups of learners being involved in incidents of violence which then pricked the interest of gangs, taking sides with the rival group, with the intention of recruiting these boys into their gangs (Petrus, 2021).

Various research studies (Bennett & Holloway, 2004; Duffy & Gillig, 2004; Rizzo, 2003) confirm that gangs are predominantly comprised of males. South Africa's National Institute for Crime Prevention and the Reintegration of Offenders (NICRO) (2011) reports that, of offender referrals to NICRO diversion programmes in the Western Cape, 80% are male and 66% are from the coloured population. The predominance of males and coloured men in gangs is confirmed by a number of research studies conducted in the Western Cape (Calix, 2013; MacMaster, 2010; Magidi, 2014; Owen & Greeff, 2015), where the phenomenon of gangsterism is particularly prevalent. Even though the phenomenon of gangsterism has been established by research to exist in predominantly so-called coloured communities, the study by Gibson and Maringira, (2020), looked at the practices of gangs in Gugulethu, a black township established in 1960 because of overcrowding in the first black residential area of Langa, also in Cape Town. The similarities between this township and the population sites of this study are that they both came into existence as a consequence of the enforcement of the segregation laws and forced removals instituted by the apartheid regime, which directly contributed to the existence of the phenomenon of gangsterism in these communities. Brankovic (2012 cited in

Gibson & Maringira, 2020) confirms that violence in Gugulethu is rooted in the structural, historical, and institutionalised inequalities of power.

Impact of gangsterism

According to Berns (2007), communities with a high population density can experience the negative impacts of reduced behavioural freedom, personal space violation, excessive social contact, and the inability to maintain desired privacy. Additionally, communities characterised by high densities tend to be associated with more violence, higher crime rates and greater victimisation rates than low-density communities (Berns, 2007). A study by Magidi (2014) also found that the presence of gangs increased fear amongst learners through their criminal activities, as some learners were fearful of being robbed or being victims of violence (Magidi, 2014).

From a sociological viewpoint, Zevallos (2003:26) wrote that "where we come from matters and can be overtly hazardous to how people perceive us". This view is confirmed by a study conducted by Ralphs, Medina and Aldridge (2009) on the consequences of staying in a gang-inhabited area for non-gang youths in Britain. They found that non-gang youth were frequently victimised by gangs, simply for residing in the same areas as their rivals. The fear of victimisation that resulted restricted the mobility of these non-gang young people (Ralphs *et al.,* 2009).

Factors contributing to gangsterism

Owen and Greeff (2015:13-18) cited the desire for material gain, availability of alcohol or drugs and a position of dominance, as well as the ability to be able to survive financially, as external factors drawing young adolescent boys to join gangs. Alagappar, Len, Goerge, Lee and Wong (2005:4) also found that students without a proper upbringing, bad surroundings, a negative family environment and social influences, as well as those in need of material goods and money, are amongst those more likely to join gangs. According to the Victim Services and Crime Prevention Unit operating under the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General in Vancouver, parents can show their children that status and a good life can be achieved through legitimate means: careers, trades, sports and the arts (Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General, Victim Services and Crime Prevention, 2011:13).

The unemployment and underemployment crisis persuaded many boys and men to permanently turn to outlaw capitalism as an alternative (Cooley, 2011). A study by Taylor (2013:340) on the reasons why young American boys join street gangs also found this to be true. Individual, peer, family, school and community factors have been cited amongst the reasons why young boys are drawn to gangs (Higginson, Benier, Shenderovich, Bedford, Mazerolle & Murray, 2018). Individual factors ranged from delinquency, substance abuse, low self-control, impulsivity and victimisation (Higginson *et al.,* 2018). Amongst the other factors mentioned were association with delinquent peers, negative family environments, low school attachment, and exposure to violence at school and in the community. (Higginson *et al.,* 2018).

Risk and protective factors

Risk factors

There is vast literature on factors that serves as push factors to gangsterism, including individual, familial, school, peer and community risk factors (Esbensen, Peterson, Taylor & Freng, 2009; Owen & Greeff, 2015; Ward, 2007; Wijnberg, 2012; Wood & Alleyne, 2009).

The focus of this article, however, is on the protective factors.

Protective factors

The factors discouraging gang involvement were personal (ambition/aspiration, identity, responsibility, morals), relational (respect for others, family values, positive relationships, reputation), fear (fear of consequences, fear of danger), avoidance (avoidance of unpleasant psychological experiences, avoidance of loss) and sense of purposelessness (denied benefit, illogicality) (Owen & Greeff, 2015). MacMaster (2010) looked at the challenge of gangsterism as experienced in Cape Flats communities that have strong church affiliations and found that the church has always been a source of support in strengthening the resilience of the residents, providing them with a sense of hope. Community members reported holding onto their faith so that they would be able to endure the most traumatic adversities that might come their way. Churches are among the few institutions that sustain a coherent focus on issues of character, meaning and purpose in life (Muller & Ellison, 2001). This socialisation may encourage young people to focus on "big picture" concerns, such as what kinds of people they want to become, what long-term goals they have, and how best to accomplish them (Muller & Ellison, 2001).

The role and influence of family, school and positive role models, among other factors, were also identified as protective buffers against the phenomenon of gangsterism. A study by Daniels and Adams (2010) also reported that sound morals and family values were amongst the factors that discouraged youth from becoming involved in gangs. Having a father or father figure present has also been confirmed by various researchers as yet another protective factor against gang involvement and delinquent behaviour for young adolescent males (Langa, 2010; Richter, Desmond, Hosegood, Madhavan, Makiwane, Makusha, Morrell & Swartz, 2012; Richter & Morrell, 2006). Although Ratele, Shefer and Clowes (2012) do not directly identify a correlation between the absent parents and gang prevalence, other studies (Boyce, Essex, Alkon, Hill-Goldsmith, Kraemer & Kupfer, 2006; Bronte-Tinkew, Moore, Capps & Zaff, 2006) emphasise the impact of a present father as a powerful tool leading to reduced psychological stress, positive intellectual development and less anti-social behaviour. The assumption would therefore be that the absent parent, especially a father, would inevitably lead to increased anti-social behaviour, which might include joining a gang.

Calix (2013) and Magidi (2014) studied the role that schooling plays as a determinant of youth involvement in gangsterism and found that the inability of the school to moderate coloured identity left youths more vulnerable and ultimately more likely to participate in gang activity (Calix, 2013; Magidi, 2014).

Having positive role models has also been identified as a protective factor against delinquent behaviour and gang involvement in young adolescent males. Identifying certain adults as role models indicates that youths believe that these individuals are worthy of imitation in some respect and that their attitudes or values are ones that they would like to assimilate (Taylor, 1989 cited in Bryant & Zimmerman, 2003:37). Higginson *et al.* (2018) cited a range of individual protective factors that prevent males' involvement in gangs, which include high levels of personal resources, a sense of coherence and a positive, culturally relevant identity. They also cited peer, family, school, and community protective factors such as peer association with non-gang affiliates, family involvement, consistent parental discipline, parental involvement in schools, and a short or no history of gang presence in communities (Higginson *et al.,* 2018). Most of these protective factors are confirmed by the findings of this study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research study used a combination of the ecological systems model and the resilience model. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems model explains the impact of different systems of an individual's environment which influence that individual's development (Duerden & Witt, 2009). The model helps in understanding the influence of interrelated social systems. According to the theory, an individual is situated at the centre of five complex layers that make up their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The theory distinguishes between five different layers, namely the microsystem, the mesosystem, the macrosystem, the exosystem and the chronosystem.

Whilst the ecological systems theory helps to understand the bidirectional influence of the interrelated social systems on the individual's decision not to become involved in gangsterism, the resilience theory argues that despite being exposed to difficult social conditions, some males still chose not to get involved in gangs. The researchers utilised the ecological systems theory to describe how the intricate layers of individual and environmental factors that prevail in the living environments of the participants aided them in their decision not to join gangs.

Resilience model

According to the researchers' understanding, individual resilience refers to those inherent, internal personality traits, characteristics and individual possesses that lead him/her to be able to cope and survive amid adverse circumstances. Family and community resilience, on the other hand, refer to the external factors around the individual that might have an impact on the individuals' ability to be able to withstand these adverse situations or circumstances. These factors can be seen as strengthening or enhancing the existing resilience of that particular individual. Even though the concept of family resilience is mentioned, it should be emphasised that this study is focused on individual resilience.

Resilience is defined by Dass-Brailsford (2005:574) as being "the ability to maintain competence despite stressful and difficult life circumstances," whilst Masten and Powell (2003:4) describe resilience as entailing patterns of positive adaptation in the context of significant risk or adversity. Furthermore, Seccombe (2002:385) states that the widely held view of resilience as an individual disposition, family trait, or community phenomenon is

insufficient, as resiliency cannot be understood or improved by merely looking at these factors. Instead, careful attention must be devoted to the structural deficiencies in society and to the social policies that families need for support to enable them to become stronger, more competent and better functioning in adverse situations (Seccombe, 2002). From the various definitions provided above, the successful adaptation of a system to unfavourable internal or external stimuli in the environment is rooted at the core of the concept which is delineated by resilience. The capacity of an individual to cope during difficult times is central to their resilience. The researchers therefore drew on this theory to unravel the intrinsic and inherent traits of participants that enabled them to resist the temptation and pressure to become involved in gangs or gang-related activities. These factors were explored from an ecological systems perspective, as this allowed the researchers not only to include individual or family traits of participants, but also to look at the impact/influences of peers, immediate surroundings, socio-political factors, structural deficiencies of society, etc., that could have played a role in preventing or protecting participants from becoming involved in gangs or gang-related activities

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The study adopted a qualitative, explorative, descriptive and contextual research design to meet the research goal and objectives. Descriptive design was used since its purpose is to observe situations and events and then describe what was observed (Neuman, 2006). Contextual designs are, according to Ritchie and Lewis (2003), concerned with identifying what exists in the social world and the way it manifests itself. This was considered appropriate as the study dealt specifically with the Northern Areas of Port Elizabeth (Gqeberha) in a geographical sense, and the topic explored was related to experience-based lessons learned by participants on factors that had buffered them against becoming involved in gangsterism. The researchers selected these two communities that came into existence as a result of the forced relocations that took place during apartheid, creating many social challenges such as a lack of resources to meet the basic needs of the people and a high unemployment rate that in turn led to the establishment of gangs in order to survive (HURP, 2011:2). The prevalence of the phenomenon of gangsterism in these communities also forms part of the reasons for selecting them for the study.

Research population, sampling technique and process

Although the sample criteria indicated males older than 18 years could be included, the research sample recruited for this study consisted of males, 25 years and older, from two different communities in the Northern Areas of Port Elizabeth (Gqeberha). The motivation for choosing males aged 18 years and older is that the researchers are interested specifically in the experiences of these participants, who have passed the stage of adolescence; which is the most vulnerable developmental psychosocial phase in an individual's life, where one is still seeking one's own identity (identity versus role confusion stage of psychosocial development) and they

have managed to go through this phase without succumbing to involvement in a gang or gang-related activities (Erikson,1968).

For this study, the researchers used a purposive sampling technique that is criterion-based. Criteria of inclusion for the study were:

- • Males, aged 18 years and older;
- • Residence in one of the two communities identified for more than 2 years; and
- • Willingness to participate in the study

Demographic profile of participants

The sample for the study comprised of eleven male participants between the ages of 25 and 50 years, from two different communities in the Northern Areas of Port Elizabeth (Gqeberha). All the participants were coloured. Most of these participants were either born or raised in these communities, or they have been residing there for most of their lives. Significantly, three of the participants were unemployed at the time of the interviews, but were not without having some sort of tertiary education, or were even doing some voluntary work in their communities at the time. This is significant as the communities these participants come from and grew up in are known for having to deal with social challenges such as poverty, high rates of unemployment and gangsterism (amongst others).

Table 1: **Demographic profile of participants**

AGE RANGE	MARITAL STATUS	EMPLOYMENT STATUS	LANGUAGE	EDUCATION LEVEL
25 years (youngest) - 50 years (eldest)	6 Married 2 Divorced 3 Single	1 full-time minister (pastor) 3 unemployed at time of this study 4 self-employed 2 employed 1 student	Afrikaans	5 participants only have secondary education level 5 have a tertiary education level 1 was still busy with tertiary education

In total 11 participants were interviewed during the study and the principle of data saturation was applied. Participation in the research was voluntary and the researchers made it clear to participants that they could choose to terminate the interview at any point. Following approval from the FRTI Committee and the Ethics Committee of the Mandela University of South Africa (H16-HEA-SDP-006), the researchers approached the ward councillors from both communities as gatekeepers with letters outlining all details of the study and what it will entail, as well as requesting the assistance of the councillors in locating participants for the study. Participants were asked to sign a written consent form prior to the interview, and all aspects of how the research would be conducted were clearly explained to participants. Participants were made aware that data would be anonymised, and pseudonyms used to protect their identity.

Methods of data collection

The method of data collection used for this study was semi-structured interviews facilitated by open-ended questions contained in an interview guide. The rationale for using semi-structured interviews is that they allowed the researchers to develop a detailed picture of the participants' experienced-based lessons on the factors that buffered them against becoming involved in gangsterism.

Data analysis

Data analysis was done using lower and higher coding techniques, with the higher coding done guided by the 8 steps outlined by Tesch as reflected in Creswell (2009:142-145). Lower coding is also referred to as "first-cycle coding" (Saldana, 2009:3):

> *The portion of data to be coded during First Cycle coding processes can range in magnitude from a single word to a full sentence to an entire page of text to a stream of moving images.*

The following general criteria were applied to ensure trustworthiness of the research findings: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Cho & Trent, 2006:322).

FINDINGS

The four principal themes generated from the data relate to the participants' experience of gangsterism, the impact of gangsterism, factors contributing to gangsterism, and protective factors. This article, however, will be foregrounding themes one and four (personal experience and protective factors, respectively), since much has already been written on the impact of gangsterism and the contributing factors.

It should be noted that, even though the participants of this study had many negative experiences and were exposed to trauma because of presence of gangs and gangsterism in their communities, they should be commended for coping and surviving despite the adverse circumstances that they faced daily. Several protective factors were identified through this study that served as safety buffers and directly contributed to the participants of this study being able to remain resilient in the face of adversity while living in a volatile environment. Their resilience and the protective factors enabled them to resist also being drawn into gang involvement and other negative activities.

Theme 1: Experience of gangsterism

Participants all shared their views on how they perceived and experienced the phenomenon of gangsterism in their respective communities. The incidence of random and frequent gang shootings caused participants to stay at home rather than go out. Despite the presence of gangs and gangsterism having a negative impact on participants, they were still able to function normally and participate in wholesome activities such as going to church and participating in sports. This can be attributed to the buffer that family support, faith/religion and positive role models provided to participants to be able to still thrive and cope in a volatile environment and be able to avoid gang involvement.

Sub-theme 1.1. Lack of freedom/restricted movement

When expressing themselves on the restriction of movement in their own communities caused by the presence of gangs and gang activities, the reactions of some participants pointed to their being really frustrated with the issue of gangsterism in their communities.

> *…you can't walk down the street without always having to look behind you at passing cars, feeling uneasy, not being able to enjoy freedom of movement.* (Participant A)

Chappell, Peterson and Joseph (cited in Magidi, 2014) confirm that living in fear prevents people from socializing and may affect an individual's longevity and relationships with the community. The authors report that people end up being afraid to go outside because they feel they might become the next victim, either on purpose or accidentally (Chappell *et al.,* cited in Magidi, 2014:46).

The inability of research participants to participate in community events or go places without restriction because of the presence of gangs hinders the development of positive relationships between the various social systems – such as those of individuals, families, peers and the broader community. This affects the meso-level interactions between the micro-level systems to such an extent that there is no social cohesion amongst community members (Magidi, 2014).

Despite the expression of such negative emotions towards the phenomenon of gangsterism and its impact on their social functioning, it should be noted that research participants still managed to adapt and function amid such adverse circumstances. It can be noted that regardless of all the reported restrictions on movement, the participants reported still being able to do certain things pertaining to their normal routine, such as going to work, school and church. The individual resilience factors spoken about by Masten and Powell (2003:4), who define resilience as "patterns of positive adaptation in the context of significant risk or adversity", can be clearly identified here.

Sub-theme 1.2. Emotions regarding changes in the types and behaviour of gangs over time

Participants expressed their feelings on the types of gangs that were currently active in their communities, as well as the behaviour of contemporary gangs in comparison to those operating when they were growing up. They described the behaviour of gangs at present as extremely violent and disrespectful.

> *…gangs were not as violent as their practices has been of late, gangs still had a fair sense of, I would say, perverse decency, they had respect for old people. If the elderly passed by them, they would put away their bottle necks* [weapons] *and greet them.* (Participant C)

Berns (2007) states that change over time in the macro system (referred to as the chrono system in the ecological systems model) can affect the status quo within the micro, meso and other parts of the system. The changes in the types and behaviours of contemporary gangs might be attributed directly to the changes that took place in the macro system over time in these respective communities. Socio-political changes in the macro system, such as the disintegration

of the family system and changes in population density, technology, and the role the media plays, as well as changes in cultural and religious belief systems, are factors contributing to the changes in the chrono system (Berns, 2007).

Another change in the macro system that could have contributed to the change in the type and behaviour of current gangs is the easy accessibility and availability of drugs and weapons at present, which might not have been the case with the gangs some decades ago. In the past, gangs were viewed as groups of young men who were 'defending' their territory and were known for settling their disputes through fist fights and knives. However, solving disputes between gangs, according to World Bank Institute (2000), has evolved to include the use of sophisticated weaponry such as guns. More firearms are now noticeable in places where there were formerly regular, traditional street fights (Odzer, 2011).

Attention should also be devoted to the fact that gangs are a social grouping (however dysfunctional) under the micro layer of the ecological system, but the bidirectional influence of this system on the other layers – the meso and macro layers – should not be discounted or ignored (Berns, 2007; Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Sub-theme 1.3. Murder of siblings due to gang involvement

One of the participants painfully recalled how the sudden death of his eldest brother as a result of his involvement in gangs meant that he and his family experienced tremendous loss and led to his decision to never get involved in gangs himself. He reports that he developed a total abhorrence towards gangs and gangsterism as a whole:

> *Because my brother was involved in many things… The morning the police came with his friends, because they caught his friends, but they killed him. And that's where I start to think twice, hey, I can't do that, I don't want to be part of that, I want to do my own thing.* (Participant F)

This response from the participant is in contrast to the findings of various studies, which report that youths with familial involvement in gangs are more at risk of becoming involved in gangs and gang-related delinquent behaviour themselves (Howell, 2010; Wijnberg, 2012; Wood & Alleyne, 2009).

Despite exposure to adversity, the participants continued with their daily lives and coped under adverse circumstances, drawing from intrapersonal, interpersonal and community resources. Their individual resilience and family support were amongst the resources cited that they could draw from, as well as the religious and other organisations they were affiliated to on a community level.

This correlates with the findings of Weakly (2006) who reports that resilience in a high-risk community is related to the ability to draw on intrapersonal, interpersonal and community resources.

Theme 4: Protective factors

Sub-theme 4.1. Benefits of family support

Participants spoke about the support they received from their families during challenging times.

For some of the participants, the support from family meant that they were raised with what they considered to be the right values and principles that would make a difference in the choices they make in life:

> *It wasn't like that, that's how we learned that it's not about having things and being part of gangsterism that will bring you these brand name things in life, it's about being respectful, it's about being obedient to your parents… Self-respect and discipline and it started in my house, my mother, and my father. That's the thing that prevents me from doing or being part of a gang. And the rules; the commandments…*
> (Participant E)

A study by Daniels and Adams (2010) reports that moral principles and family values were amongst the factors that discouraged youths from becoming involved in gangs. The quality of the interrelations and bidirectional influences in the meso level during an individual's development plays a pivotal role in that particular individual's socialisation and identity formation. This is due to socialisation outcomes being affected by many variables, such as those related to biological, sociocultural and interactional factors (Berns, 2007; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The values and principles that were instilled in the participants when growing up can therefore be seen as protective factors that prevented them from becoming involved in gangsterism. Drawing from the resilience model, it can be argued that these values enabled an enhanced resilience in the participants to be able to resist gang involvement or involvement in any anti-social activities or behaviours.

Participants also spoke about how most of them were fortunate to have their fathers present in their lives, not only physically but also as role models, guiding them into becoming the men they are today:

> *I loved my father dearly and I think his approval of me was, without a doubt the biggest thing. …but my father's moral authority in the family, his quiet uhm ways, I never wanted to disappoint him… So, he was a non-smoking, non-drinking, non-swearing man, uh very biblical, loved old people and always cared for others. I've never ever met a person that had something negative to say about my dad. (Participant C)*

> *…my father said, I'm always gonna refer to my father, because he's the most important person in my life. As you get older you realise that all the things your father has taught you, you using it now for your children, you know? (Participant D)*

The way participants spoke about their fathers clearly indicated the very pivotal role fathers played in the lives of the participants, as well as their development and identity formation from adolescents to male adults. It can therefore be assumed that the role of a father is crucial when

it comes to the development and identity formation of a child, especially boys, growing up, and that it should not be taken for granted that having their fathers in their lives to guide and be role models to them also served as a buffer against gangsterism for these participants.

Several studies (Langa, 2010; Richter *et al.,* 2012; Richter & Morrell, 2006) confirm the importance of fathers in the lives of their children, stating that the absence of fathers or father figures in the lives of especially boys can be detrimental to the type of men they become when they are adults.

Participants advised that parents should be cautious and ensure that gangs do not replace their family systems. They commented as follows:

> *So, so from that uhm, very unique parental support structure, family support structure, I can say I was very lucky, so definitely that had a huge, you know, a huge role.…my personal experience is, if you, if you have family, a support structure, uh if you have communication in your household, that wouldn't happen…* (Participant B)

> *…gangsterism do provide a sense of belonging and that's a fact, especially for young boys, but that sense of belonging only lasts until you become a victim within that own gang…* (Participant H)

Skiba and Peterson (2000) report that gangs' lifestyles create a mind-set of loyalty, pride and love for youths who are disengaged from their families. They further report that where a young man comes from a dysfunctional family, in which they may be neglected or do not receive adequate attention from their families, the gang can easily replace the family as a key influential factor. When bonds are created in the gang, these bonds may replace traditional family systems.

Sub-theme 4.2. Influence of the church, faith, or religion

Participants' reflections indicated that they believed that the role their faith or religion played in their lives when they were growing up directly contributed to them never getting involved in gangsterism or gang activities. Participants displayed strong convictions when it came to discussing the faith and religion that they were raised with:

> *That's how, church is a big, is a big solution and the contribution not to be involved in gangsterism, because if you do things for the church and if you find yourself in the church, then you make yourself happy in the church, then you won't see the need to join gangsterism.* (Participant E)

Another participant from the Islamic faith shared this sentiment:

> *Ja, the main thing also above my father, for me personally, was my firm belief in my religion you know, Islam. You know, it has kept me rooted…* (Participant D)

Religious communities may build social capital in part by providing norms, values and information for young people. Many religious communities also uphold prescriptive norms in that they try to promote an understanding of what is expected of young people in the way of spirituality, behaviour, dating, altruism and civic commitment (Donahue & Benson, 1995;

Elder & Conger, 2000; Eklin & Roehlkepartain, 1992, all cited in Muller & Ellison, 2001). Churches and synagogues are among the few institutions that sustain a coherent focus on issues of character, meaning and purpose in life. This socialisation may encourage young people to focus on "big picture" concerns, such as what kinds of people they want to become, what long-term goals they have and how best to accomplish them (Muller & Ellison, 2001:158). With reference to the ecological systems model as well as the resilience model, the church can therefore be seen as one of the most pivotal positive influences in the relational interactions a person has on the meso level during his/her development, as well as a critical enhancer in the building of resilience in an individual's life so as to be able to cope and deal with adverse situations (Berns, 2007; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Masten & Powell, 2003; Seccombe, 2002).

Some of the participants reported that their lives changed for the better and reached a turning point after experiencing certain religious/spiritual encounters. Some described it as 'a touch by the Holy Spirit', or a 'deep level of encountering God in church.' This is how one participant explained it:

> *...if you've experienced God in your life, there's no turning back, because if you've literally experienced the Holy Spirit, you won't be able to stand behind a gun and shoot someone, because the Holy Spirit will convict you, you know what I'm saying? You won't, you won't feel the same again. On a Sunday I've stood in church and then God touched me. I have been touched; I have experienced the Holy Spirit...* (Participant B)

The experience of a 'higher power' or the Holy Spirit as described by the participants came with great conviction, as they truly believed in its contribution to their decision not to get involved in gangsterism. Religious encounters that led to a conversion to Christianity are described by Peel (2003) and Kolapo (2000) when they speak about the work done by missionaries amongst the Yoruba people in Nigeria. According to the authors, this tribe practised different religious beliefs prior to the visits of the missionaries, but after experiencing certain spiritual encounters, they converted to Christianity (Kolapo, 2000; Peel, 2003).

Sub-theme 4.3. Influence of positive role models

Participants also attributed the fact that they never got involved in gangs or gang-related activities to the presence of role models in their lives other than their parents. They mentioned older siblings, teachers, pastors and spiritual leaders and role models from the broader community as having a positive influence on them.

Some participants ascribed their non-involvement in gangs to the fact that they had older siblings as role models to look up to:

> *Seeing my cousins become this, it obviously creates a yearning inside of me. If you have a cousin that becomes a lawyer, a doctor, it must create something inside of you like, 'I wanna be like that', unless that can only create something inside of you unless you have positive impact on your life.* (Participant B)

Like parents, siblings can provide an emotional bond, advice and assistance. They also model behaviour that adolescents may be inclined to imitate. Adolescents may be more aligned with the views of siblings than with those of parents as they are closer in age (Bryant & Zimmerman, 2003:39).

Participants praised the teachers who had a positive impact on their lives as they were growing up and attested to the fact that that their positive impact also contributed to them not becoming involved in gangs and gang activities:

> *...the idea that my teachers; that the people at school actually care for me and actually have an interest in my success, uhm, those things for me were things that I used... So, so, so teachers and again, social schooling... influenced in the choice not to be involved. …my parents never sat with me with my books, I still, I can't recall in my high school that my parents ever bothered with that, uhm, but my teachers did. And their influence, their classroom instruction, their mentorship outside of the classroom, was very important to us as fillers for the rest of your life...* (Participant C)

The way in which participants reflected on the positive influence their teachers had on them growing up suggested that they were surprised that somebody other than their biological fathers or relatives could care about where they end up in life. Participants showed great appreciation for the positive contribution made by teachers to them becoming the men they are today. One participant said the fact that the teacher's mentorship did not end at the classroom door was very important to him, as it taught him lessons that he could take with him for the rest of his life.

Having male role models from the broader community where participants stayed was also amongst the reasons given for them not becoming involved in gangsterism:

> *… There's one other thing that I've forgotten to mention; the influence of people in your street, or in your community uhm, is also a thing that we underrate. Uhm, the guy that helped me get through high school, especially helped me with matric preparation and passing, was my next-door neighbour who was a teacher. …Uhm a neighbour across the street, a man that died many years ago, Uncle Bill, he used to always have time to talk to me, uh whether I knew what he was saying or not, it was just the fact an old man took time.* (Participant C)

A study by Daniels and Adams (2010) reinforces the significance of the above experiences by indicating that gangsterism forms a safe backdrop to childhoods characterised by a lack of personal validation in families and the scarcity of suitable role models. Adults play a central role in the socialisation of adolescents. The presence of an adult in an adolescent's life may be a distinguishing factor between youths who successfully avoid the negative effects of risks they face and those who follow trajectories toward deviance (Werner & Smith, 1982 cited in Bryant & Zimmerman, 2003:36).

Sub-theme 4.4. Fatherhood

Two of the participants specifically recalled how the birth of a child, whose upbringing they really wanted to be part of, also played a major role in their non-involvement in gangs. This is consistent with the findings of a study by Moloney, MacKenzie, Hunt and Joe-Laidle (2009:7), where participants referred to fatherhood as a 'turning point' in their lives and key to their rejection of a life of gangsterism and crime:

> *...and when I got my first child at the age of...at the age of uh 19 years old, that gave me the other reason not to be part of gangsters. And most important of that reason is that I asked myself, if I'm a gangster, how would my child grow up? And what was in my mind, is, was, is that I didn't want my child to point a finger back to me and say "how can you tell me not to be a gangster, but you are part of the gangsters? How can you tell me to live a clean and a free life, but you are not doing?"* (Participant E)

Kelly and Ward (2017) found that fatherhood resulted in young males leaving the life of gangsterism for the sake of their children. Fatherhood supported them in leaving the gang life because it gave them a new-found sense of meaning and purpose; this is consistent with the study, stated above, by Moloney *et al.* (2009).

Sub-theme 4.5. Education

Participants advocated education as a major factor in achieving independence. One of them even said it did not matter whether he obtained his degree 20 years after finishing school; it was the highlight of his life:

> *I had a desire to go to university since I was little. After working for 20 years, I went to NMMU 2011 until 2015 when I graduated, 2015. And you know it's the highlight of a person's life and when you look back, then you also see how far you've come and gangsterism was, you know, how can I put it, was an issue that didn't really motivate a person.* (Participant A)

Studies (Calix, 2013; Magidi, 2014) on the role that schooling plays as a determinant of youth involvement in gangsterism found that the inability of the school to moderate coloured identity left youths feeling more vulnerable and ultimately more likely to participate in gang activity. They further state that a strong school presence within a community holds the potential to build the self-esteem, confidence and determination in youths that are needed to make sense of an extremely racialised and fragmented social reality. Schooling can also generate positive social capital, moderating coloured youth identity, and ultimately reduce youth involvement in gangsterism.

Sub-theme 4.6. Participation in wholesome pursuits

Participants recommended participation in wholesome pursuits to escape gangsterism, as they could attest to the fact that involvement in sports and other extramural activities whilst growing up played a role in them not becoming involved in gangs or gang activities.

Some participants attributed the fact that they never showed interest in gangs due to their involvement in sports:

> *...Sport was the biggest role also of preventing me of becoming part of a gangster. I participated at school in sports, to keep me busy with the positive things, like playing, I did play rugby for the schools, and I played soccer. And Saturdays and Sundays, Sunday afternoons, Sunday mornings church and Sunday afternoons I also played rugby. So, all these positive things that I tried to capture for myself, to keep me away from the negative things.* (Participant E)

Participation in sports and other extramural activities was also recommended by Parker (2010), who found that children of poor socio-economic backgrounds tend to be less involved in structured activities and spend time playing outdoors and 'hanging out', which can further lead to poor school grades and behavioural problems. Such circumstances negatively influence their decision-making abilities, thus increasing the chances of them being recruited by gangs. Sport is often praised for its potential to promote certain societal outcomes. These outcomes cover a multitude of policy areas, including health, community cohesion and safety, integration of minorities, urban regeneration, and crime prevention and reduction (Kidd, 2008; Coalter, 2007; Walseth & Fasting, 2004, all cited in Spaaij, 2009:247, 253). Sport is seen as potentially contributing positively to a wide array of social issues, including social integration and participation, community safety and crime reduction (Spaaij, 2009).

Two participants also spoke about how being removed from their usual environment and surroundings and being exposed to new environments, new people, new experiences and new opportunities on a regular basis had contributed to them not wanting to follow the norm of becoming involved in gangsterism. Gangsterism seemed to be the norm in their usual surroundings, but being exposed to new surroundings, experiences, people and opportunities helped them to realise that there was much more to achieve, and it created a yearning for better things. Exposure to new surroundings and people broadened participants' horizons to look and aspire beyond the daily way of life in their communities:

> *Not actually, so basically for me, I've done this a lot, where I've moved to a certain family member's area. Uhm I'm a person who like to experience things and with me experiencing something, that makes me wanna give something. So, if I come to a certain area, I adapt to that behaviour, so I learn those behaviour and I go back and I try to implement that behaviour where I'm staying and that is what driven me to become a better person, because I love to experience things. I know what it is to be out there, I know what it is to wanna become something; I've seen what people have become from making successes from nothing to something. So, for me that is my drive, so that is why basically I get a break away, to experience something different so I can implement that in my life.* (Participant B)

Another participant shared his experiences of going out of his environment with the church youth camps and described how that influenced him positively to believe in a better life beyond gangsterism and crime:

And those days, what we have done, we had youth camps and we would go out of the area for a week or so and there we would've learned things and you learn the things there and you come and live it here in your life. You learn positive things there, not to worry about your circumstances, but to look out for a brighter future. (Participant H)

Participants in a study by Alagappar *et al.* (2005) suggest that more healthy and productive activities be made available for teenagers to occupy their time and keep them away from involvement in gangs and gang activities. The role that education, participation in sports and other extramural activities played in buffering the participants of this study against becoming involved in gangsterism is evident from these reflections and from the literature consulted.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study reflected on the experience-based lessons from selected males from two communities in the Northern Areas of Port Elizabeth (Gqeberha) on factors they perceived to have protected them from becoming involved in gangsterism.

The experiences of gangsterism shared by participants were clearly not positive ones. The lack of freedom, restrictions on movement and the disruption of their daily routines because of the presence of gangs in their respective surroundings were amongst the experiences shared by participants from the study. They also expressed disgust and surprise about the nature of gangs recently that had no respect or regard for human lives, compared to the gangs of the past who, they claimed, still had a certain amount of 'respect', especially for church and elderly people. Central to this perception is the fact that participants themselves were constantly living in fear of becoming the victims of these gangs, i.e. being robbed, assaulted or even hit by a stray bullet at any given time. Being labelled a gangster and victimised just for staying in the same area as gangs were also one of the negative impacts of gangsterism mentioned by participants. Despite all the negative experiences of the gang phenomenon, participants were still able to thrive and participate in wholesome activities because of the buffers that families, religion and other positive factors created that encouraged them to repudiate gang involvement.

Most importantly, participants shared factors that they believed had played a role in protecting them from becoming involved in gangsterism, despite the fact of living and growing up in the same communities where the phenomenon of gangsterism is so prevalent. Amongst other things, the role and influence of religion, faith and the church, benefits of family support, influence of positive role models, fatherhood, education and participation in wholesome pursuits such as sports and other extra-mural activities were amongst the protective factors cited by participants.

Recommendations for policy, practice and future research

- Opportunities for higher/tertiary education for young males from previously disadvantaged communities plagued by social ills such as crime, poverty, unemployment and gangsterism should be lobbied and advocated for.

- Restoration of disintegrated family units should be facilitated through the involvement of services from social workers, psychologists and family counsellors in communities where the phenomenon of gangsterism is very prevalent.
- Spiritual/religious communities should advocate, restore and strengthen the role of spiritual leaders and their involvement in the moral regeneration of communities.
- It is also recommended that programmes be established and implemented to build and strengthen the resilience of families in communities plagued by social ills such as gangsterism.
- Further research should focus on how the protective factors identified by this study could be strengthened to enhance individual and community resilience.
- Existing anti-gang policies and programmes should be reviewed to devise workable interventions and programmes in line with the findings of this and other research studies, coupled with the current punitive approach to dealing with the phenomenon of gangsterism.
- Research on the phenomenon of gangsterism is predominantly done in so-called coloured areas and not much is written about the existence of the phenomenon in black and other communities. Therefore, further research is recommended on the phenomenon of gangsterism and its manifestation in the township areas where the population is predominantly Xhosa speaking, as well as other areas, in comparison with so-called coloured areas.

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