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## Joining Gangs: Living on the edge?

### Abstract

The paper attempts to disseminate street gang research by Hesketh (2018) that has identified a major aspect of young disenfranchised people's attraction to street gangs as edgework risk-taking. The study which sought to identify differences between those who joined street gangs compared to those who abstained on Merseyside involved 44 young males age 18-25. Two samples were taken from locations within the five boroughs of Merseyside, the first comprising of 22 participants involved in street gangs as active and ex-members with a second sample consisting of 22 participants who had completely abstained from street gang membership. Data was collected through the adoption of Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM, Wengraf, 2005), with analysis taking the form of Strauss and Corbin's (1990) version of grounded theory. Of the many findings that surrounded what was identified as the core category/central phenomena of "*coping with limited opportunity*" it emerged that marginalisation and austerity were contributing to increasing inequality and institutional constraint on young people on Merseyside. As a result, many of the 18-25 year young men felt powerless, lacking identity and aspirational drive. Joining a gang thus became not only a way in which control was seized back from such constraint through criminal risk-taking behaviour, what Lyng, 1990 has termed "*edgework*"<sup>1</sup>, but also a means in which many of the young men interviewed gained an identity of being 'bad' from which intrinsically pleasurable seductive and criminally erotic sensations were derived (Katz, 1988; Ferrell and Sanders, 1995a). Moreover, a relatively new version of edgework was also identified although by way of mainly male testimony. Called "*vicarious edgework*", the phenomena sees young women drawn to male gang members ("bad boys") to derive the excitement of risk indirectly while remaining law-abiding. In sum, the paper highlights a concerning socio-psychological and key motivating driver triggered by marginalisation. This, the author contends has been largely neglected by risk factor focused interventions that on Merseyside largely concentrate on around the dysfunctional family. The paper concludes by discussing a possible way by which such phenomena could be countered.

**Key terms:** edgework, gangs, criminal erotic's, cultural criminology, vicarious edgework, rational choice theory

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<sup>1</sup> Edgework is a term first coined by journalist Hunter S. Thompson in his book debut, "*Fear and loathing in Las Vegas*" (1972) to describe the lengths people will go to in order to find intrinsic pleasure and fulfilment.

## Introduction

Hesketh (2018) has noted the wide and varied amount of cultural criminological literature indicating the significance of edgework and the seductive allure of thrill-seeking (Katz, 1988; Ferrell and Sanders, 1995a; Lyng, 2005; Miller, 2005). Yet despite this, there has been very little in terms of interventions aimed at focusing on this concerning social-psychological facet. It is an aspect which Hesketh (2018) has observed is proving an important motivating factor for young people to join gangs on Merseyside. Thus, the study has found support for Millers (2005) observations on the convergence between Lyng's (2005) idea of edgework as applied to juvenile delinquency and Katz's (1988) contention surrounding the idea that a primary motivating driver for crime can in many cases [i.e., street gang crime] be located in the whole experience itself.

## Existing Literature

Cultural criminology: A criminology of the skin?

In introducing cultural criminology Ferrell and Sanders (1995a) called for the inclusion of a "*criminology of the skin*". Criminology that would attempt to go beyond the dominant, traditional forms of criminology that continuously emphasised rational choice and sociological positivist theories of offending. Instead, the focus would be on inwardly psychological "criminal pleasures and desires" triggered by the pursuit of risk-taking and transgression, ways in which the individual can not only derive a feeling of seductive pleasure but also self-empowerment in marginalised environments filled by institutional agencies that seek to scrutinise and control. The idea of a criminology of the skin has, in the early stages, received some condemnation from Frank (1995) for attempting to regress towards the realms of the old, and now discredited, Lombrosian type biological theories (possibly the main reason for its wider academic neglect). Yet, Ferrell and Sanders (1995a) have opened up an interesting avenue warranting further investigation, particularly about the study of gangs that go some way to incorporate how both contemporary environmental and psychological frameworks work together in propelling a young person towards gang membership.

For some young people (and indeed adults) there is a certain gratification in extreme forms of institutional defiance through risky pleasure-seeking (joyriding, anti-social behaviour and street crime). Set around the backdrop of an increasingly economically judicious, conservative and austere world, crime and badness for some young people can be transformed into an addictive and self-destructive form of erotic hedonism. Moreover, Lyng (2006) has developed a model of edgework, which has perhaps provided additional support for such themes to be investigated with greater scrutiny. Edgework theory explores why individuals influenced by risk, for no real reason or material gain, are willing to indulge in possible self-destructive behaviour.

Edgework (Lyng, 2006):

In 1971, controversial American gonzo journalist, Hunter S. Thompson first introduced the expression "*edgework*", in his book debut "*Fear and loathing in Las Vegas*" to describe how

some people are willing to push the boundaries of risk to the limit. Nineteen years later, Lyng (1990) adopted the term as a definition for individuals who voluntarily look for experiences that can involve a high probability of personal injury or lead to death. Interestingly, however, in commenting on Lyng's concept of edgework, Laurendeau (2006) has observed:

Lyng outlines two general approaches to explaining the relationship between edgework activities and the institutions of late modernity. The first conceptualises edgework as an escape from the institutional constraints of modernity, while the second frames edgework activity as part of the project developing the skills and capacities needed to better function in the increasingly specialised and risk-conscious institutional environment of post-industrial society (p.386).

Lyng's work initially focused predominantly on what Hayward (2002) calls "prototypically masculine middle-class pursuits" (p. 88), these included, mountain rock climbing and car racing. However, put into the context of young disenfranchised people, and there is evidence to argue that increasingly deteriorating social conditions involving austere policymaking that affects marginalised communities the most, will indeed provide triggering mechanisms for a form of criminological edgework. Since young people now occupy a world where control is being increasingly 'wrestled' away under the moral crusading banner of law and order precedence, rather than create any form of stability and contentment such constraint only serves to create what Hayward (2002) calls a "hyper-banalization of society" (p. 85). This, Hayward suggests, had made transgressive behaviour more seductive not only in terms of individual (*a'la katz*) experience, but also on a symbolic sub-conscious level since "it offers a way of seizing control over one's destiny" (2002, p. 82). In effect, such environments can and often do create a veritable breeding ground for risk-taking with all of its deviant and criminally erotic sub-properties through the unity of gang membership. As Garot (2015) asserts, it is the most estranged among us, those who live on the edge of deprivation and poverty, may in fact, be the most likely candidates for edgework.

The 2011 riots provide a prime example of the consequence of not only such increased constraint, but also the allure of risk. Constraint as a result of government surveillance and growing criminalisation of activities and certain individual youthful populations that already felt marginalised, the allure of risk made acceptable and seductively beneficial through the complete freedom of violence, running with a mob of like-minded peers. Taking a Katzian view and focusing on the pleasure that some young people can derive from deviant networks that would include street gang membership Winlow (2004) comments "'Doing wrong' can be thrilling and intrinsically enjoyable and it can also be linked to forms of status and identity" (p. 18).

In directing Ferrel and Sanders (1995a) towards the study of criminology of the skin, the work of Katz (1988) represents a fundamental influence. For Katz, the theory of criminality lay not in structural explanations, but in the roots of moral transgression<sup>2</sup> and sensual attractions to doing evil. Thus, it is the emotional experience of a criminal offence in its entirety (Pre-offence, during the criminal act and post offence) and the reasons that lay behind the need to express such emotions in the form of a crime. As Hayward (2002) explains:

Causal explanations of criminality that stress the importance of structural, environmental, genetic or rational choice factors, over and above the emotional and interpretative qualities of crime, are often guilty of stripping away and repressing key individual emotions such as humiliation, arrogance, ridicule, cynicism, (and importantly) pleasure and excitement; emotions that, in many cases, are central to the criminal event (p. 2).

Moreover, Katz comments that these pleasurable seductive and sensual elements represent a “black box of crime” since very few criminologists have dared to fully explore the inner dark nature that can push many towards criminality. For Katz, like Lyng (1990), the visceral inner experiences that surround risk-taking offer offenders the chance of escaping from the mundane, banality of everyday routine existence. For some, as Hesketh (2018) observed, there is an even darker criminal erotic side that for young men is vented through displays of hyper-masculinity and sadistically destructive, anti-social acts that can contribute towards the personification of a desired image of badness.

#### Edgework and women

In 1991, researcher Eleanor Miller challenged Lyng’s interpretation by observing his lack of attention to women, ethnic minorities and the socially excluded. She asserts “Lyng does not know what the edgework of women and/or the ethnic minorities or underclass would look like because he did not look for empirical evidence of it” (p.1532). From the context of women as risk-takers, Walklate (1997), has commented:

women unquestionably seek pleasure, excitement, thrills and risks. How and under what circumstances this occurs, however, has been explored relatively infrequently, and when it has it is often been pathologized. Women are, after all, the ‘Other’; typically defined as being outside the discourse of risk and risk-seeking (p. 43).

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<sup>2</sup> Presdee (2000) distinguishes transgressive crime from resistant crime by commenting “Transgressive crime stands separately from resistant crime in that transgression is an act that breaks through the boundaries in order to shock and stand outside of the existing rules, regulations and rhythms of the social world” (p. 18).

Research into women as risk-takers have highlighted that “women can and do embrace risk for much the same purposes as do men” (O’Malley, 2010; p. 76). However, in some respects, this is not to argue that gender does not play an important role in shaping the form of risk-taking behaviour of men and women. Katz (1988) observed that crimes involving men and risk-taking is usually “distinctively male forms of action and ways of being” (pp.246-247). Street gangs provide the perfect outlet for young males, both in terms of providing hyper-masculine identity and momentary escapism through edgework risk-taking crimes. For women, risk-taking on the individual level appears to be most prominent.

### Young British risk-takers

In considering the observations of Katz, 1988; Ferrell and Sanders, 1995a and Lyng, 2005 on edgework risk-taking, another component should be considered. Writing in 2007, Zimbardo highlights what he has termed “*deindividuation*” by commenting:

[The] “Mardi Gras” effect involves individuals temporarily giving up the traditional cognitive and moral constraints on personal behaviour when part of a group of likeminded revellers bent on having fun without thoughts of subsequent consequences and liabilities. It is de-individualization in-group action (p.307).

Taken from the context of British working-class youth culture and edgework, it is possible to identify such deindividuation in operation at two extremes. In the first instance, British research has always noted that early youth cultures in the UK have a renowned history of dressing openly in particular sets of dress code which immediately put such individuals at risk of social stigma. Cohen’s (1971) Rockers (leather jackets and jeans) and Mods (Fishtail parkers and drainpipe trousers) followed by the Punks of the 1980s (coloured hair and ripped T-shirts with Doc Martins). It is a pattern of dressing, talking and even walking that Ferrell and Sanders (1995a) contend have become a semiotic link between cultural practice and a willingness to seek a deviant identity. This act of not only embracing deviant identity, but visually and collectively reflecting it through dress while running the risk of stigma by the wider community audience can represent an added dimension within the edgework experience.

Today around the UK there are street gangs whose members like their early predecessors dress identical to one another. This has become particularly evident in excluded areas of Merseyside, where Hesketh (2018) observed young people adopting an all-black dress code using the brand “*North Face*” all-terrain, clothing (black hoodie anoraks and matching tracksuit bottoms coupled with a military-style cap), called by two participants “being blacked out”. This, Hesketh (2018) noted has become a primary identifier of potential gang membership on Merseyside. Such observation is reinforced by media images of young “blacked out” males involved in anti-social behaviour which have turned the North Face brand into a symbol not only of street gangs but also of youthful badness on Merseyside. Today, edgework driven street gangs would indeed appear to be drawing on parallels with

Hebdige's (1979) reflexions, that those individuals who mirror this militaristic all-black attire, are projecting a symbolic violation of the social order in true "*semiotic guerrilla*" style warfare. Moreover, Hesketh (2018) noted that such management of representation, was not just evident in attire, but also overlapped in the graffiti which talked of "*street soldiers*" while their state-appointed oppressors were awarded the branded tag of simply *FTM* ("*Fuck the Matrix*"<sup>3</sup>). As Clarke (2003) notes, with deindividuation, comes much greater freedom and a reduction of personal accountability, leading to increased risk-taking and moral disengagement (Bandura, 1990, 2002). Taken from a cultural criminological perspective, such uniformity, coupled with ways of talking<sup>4</sup> also, add a hegemonically sinful masculine and emblematic appeal for individuals to both identify with, and be identified as, street gang members. In sum, the last eighteen years have seen such dress/style and language emerge, its sub-cultural pattern much in line with Ferrell and Sanders (1995b) comments that:

To speak of a criminal subculture is to recognize not only an association of people, but a network of symbols, meaning, and knowledge. Members of a criminal subculture learn and negotiate "motives, drives, rationalizations, and attitudes;" develop elaborate conventions of language, appearance, and presentation of self; and in so doing participate, to greater or lesser degrees, in a subculture, a collective way of life (p. 4).

These observations appear to be strengthened by past research findings indicating something of a trend in which criminal participation, including antisocial destructive behaviour increases after individuals who join street gangs, and then decreases subsequently when members leave (Thornberry et al., 2003). In the second extreme, deindividuation can also trigger empowerment through risk as a result of how the system responds to young disenfranchised people simply ignoring any attempt at individuality preferring to view them as mundane numbers in statistical databases. As Zimbardo (2007) points out:

Anonymity can be conferred on others not only with masks but also by the way that people are treated in given situations. When others treat you as if you are not a unique individual but just an undifferentiated 'other' being processed by the System, or your existence is ignored, you feel anonymous. The sense of a lack of personal identity can also induce anti-social behaviour (p.301).

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<sup>3</sup> The Matrix disruptive team is part of Merseyside Police, they consist of inspectors, sergeants and constables who form the first response to any major incident in the Merseyside area. That includes gun and gang-related crime. Over the years the Matrix has faced some controversy over the professional conduct of some of its officers.

<sup>4</sup> Hesketh (2018) has noted that males on Merseyside and particularly males involved in street gangs use the word '*lad*' and/or '*lid*' (as in '*kid*' virtually after every sentence to convey a form of masculine mutual acceptance).

Drawing on the riots of 2011 highlighted disenfranchised peoples frustration at feeling simply ignored and constrained by a world surrounded by conspicuous consumption. For most caught up in the looting element, motivation became part of the thrill and risk with any prize drawn from the ransacked shops representing just a bonus. As Pitts (2011) contends:

riots are complex events and cannot be explained away as "just thuggery". They have to be seen against the backdrop of "growing discontents" about youth unemployment, education opportunities and income disparities. He says most of the rioters are from poor estates who have no "stake in conformity", who have nothing to lose. They have no career to think about. They are not 'us'. They live out there on the margins, enraged, disappointed, capable of doing some awful things (BBC.com/magazine)

### **Method**

This paper is based on the research by Hesketh (2018) which primarily addresses the issue of street gang involvement and non-involvement in gang prevalent areas of Merseyside. Specifically, the research addressed why some individuals with similar backgrounds do or do not become involved in street gangs and the potential implications for their future life choices. The study made several observations around differences between street gang members, ex-street gang members and non-street gang members of which edgework risk-taking behaviour was highly significant. For this study, Hesketh (2018) adopted the following method:

#### **Participants and gang definition:**

Two samples of participants were drawn from marginalised areas of Merseyside consisting of a total of 44 males age range 18-25. The first sample consisting of 26 gang-involved participants, with the second containing 11 non-gang participants (termed "*Non-Group Participants*" (NGPs)) and 7 individuals identified as ex-gang participants. In determining gang and non-gang members, such participants had self-reported as being a member or former member of a deviant street group that met the Euro-Gang Research Network (EGRN, Weerman, Maxson, Esbensen, Aldridge, Medina, van Gemert, 2009) criteria for defining a gang, since at the time of writing, the definition represented the most commonly cited definition of a "gang". in contrast, the non-gang members' self-reported as not being affiliated to any group that conformed to the EGRN definition.

## **Data collection:**

Data collection involved the use of a specially adapted version of Wengraf's (2001) Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM). The adoption of this approach added a unique approach to the study since it attempted to break away from the stranglehold semi-structured interview has on qualitative inquiry. The BNIM approach saw each interview situation broken into two basic sub-sessions:

### Sub-Session 1 (SS-1):

In this first session, participants were asked to describe their life, in terms of their family, friends, involvement in the Criminal Justice System (CJS) and future aspirations. This was achieved through the use of a single question called an "*SQIN*" (Single Question Inducing Narrative). In the case of the non-street gang members and ex-street gang members<sup>5</sup>, the question was re-phrased to why they had not become involved in the CJS as street gang members. During this session, the researcher simply took notes on what Wengraf (2001) terms "*Particular Incident Narratives*" (PINs), that is, narrative incidents that had occurred in each participant's life surrounding family, friends, involvement/non-involvement with the CJS and future aspirations.

**Fifteen-minute break:** During this short break, the researcher devised questions surrounding the PINs to ask each participant in second sub-session.

### Sub-Session 2 (SS-2): The return to narrative:

The second session began with the researcher asking the participant the series of questions devised during the break. At the beginning of each question and in keeping with the biographically themed approach, each question began with phrases that included: "Thinking back ...", "reflecting on what you said about ...", "recalling the incidents you spoke of involving ...".

In sum, over the two sub-sessions, each participant produced two lengthy transcripts of narrative for data analysis.

## **Data Analysis:**

Data were analysed using the Strauss and Corbin (1990) version of Grounded Theory (GT). In this version, three stages, open, axial and selective coding were utilised in the following way:

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<sup>5</sup> The ex-gang members were asked why they had not become involved in the CJS as gang members as opposed to why they had because all of the ex-gang members while conforming to involvement with a gang that met the ERGN definition, had not been involved in a gang for a prolonged time.

## Open coding

Opening coding starts with the researcher reading through each transcript and developing as many concepts as possible, in this case, line by line sections of speech as accurately and precisely as possible. Each section was coded in as many ways as possible, with all possible meanings taken into account until “*theoretical saturation*” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p.188) was achieved resulting in a coding list. Moreover, memos were written both before and during the open coding stage. These took the form of a brief theoretical note concerning a general idea about the data. Memos form a fundamental part of the grounded analysis process (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Birks and Mills, 2011). In terms of the research, some concepts possessed conceptual properties to be included in two or more categories. This can be exemplified by a concept taken directly from one participant (in effect an in vivo code<sup>6</sup>) “*black sheep*”. This was used to describe the participants’ perception of how he was seen by family members and his subsequent reflections about his identity. That is, how he saw himself both in a domestic family and community setting. This appeared to denote a *negative family experience* and later, subsequently, *past identity factors*. At stage one, all transcripts had been fully coded. Table .1 shows the number of concepts and categories generated for both gang members and Non-gang/ex-gang members.

**Table 1. Open coding: Number of concepts generated (stage one)**

<b>Sample</b>	<b>Concepts</b>	<b>Subcategories</b>
Gang members	932	105
Gang non-members/ex-members	949	106

Having completed the initial open coding stage, more intensive work began with putting the fractured data back together in its revised form Strauss and Corbin (1990). The actual process used in this Axial Stage Two was basically to make connections between categories mapping how each category relates to others to establish if there was a relationship or simply a co-existence. This stage aims to develop main categories through analysis of what have now become subcategories beyond just dimension and properties. At this particular point, Strauss and Corbin suggest that the researcher “focus on specifying a category (*phenomenon*) in terms of the conditions that give rise to it” (1990, p. 97). To do this they recommend that the researcher begins to relate subcategories to a principle category by using what they have called the “*paradigm model*” (1990, p. 99).

While filtering several similar subcategories emerged. For example, *negative family reflections* and *positive family reflections* (both related subcategories). These were later merged to form a principle category of *family experience* since there existed some general properties within both in terms of the extent of exposure to the family and duration of time spent with family members were similar. Others, such as *criminal action* and *directed and proactive objectives* were carried through since these proved to be very strong *strategy* subcategories that became categories in themselves. Again, as with the open coding stage any further observations and thoughts made were included in this stage. Table. 2 shows the total number of categories identified for each sample at the axial stage, stage two of the analysis.

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<sup>6</sup> In vivo codes: words or phrases used directly by the interviewee that can be used as names for codes and categories in the coding process.

**Table 2. Axial coding: merging sub-categories into main categories  
(stage two)**

<b>Sample</b>	<b>Sub-category</b>	<b>Main category</b>
Gang members	105	68
Non-gang members/ex-members	106	66

Selective coding

In the third and final stage of the analysis, the emphasis was placed on identifying a *core category* or categories that would represent the central phenomenon within the main coding paradigm. For this, as Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggest, the researcher now moves from description to conceptualisation via a five-step process this includes first involves the formulation of a *storyline*, and then attempts to *relate categories* around the core category again using the *paradigm model* (1990, p. 99). Such category relationships should be done on the dimensional level, at which point the researcher should then *validate* those relationships against the data. The final stage is to *fill in* categories that may need further refinement. Strauss and Corbin (1990) stress, however, that this five-stage process need not be taken in a linear sequence, “in reality one moves back and forth between them” (p. 118). Strauss and Corbin observed that such integration of categories, even for some seasoned researchers can be very difficult. However, such was the richness and density of the data that the main phenomena became quite obvious and a core category emerged relatively quickly. This was identified as “*coping with marginalisation and limited opportunity*”. When attempting to identify or create a core category as Strauss and Corbin further note, “just like categories, the core category must become developed in terms of its properties. If you can tell the story properly, in addition to revealing the core category the story should also indicate its properties” (1990, p. 123). In this study, the core category produced two major properties, *resilience* and *perceived risk* together with their dimensional range. These were identified throughout the data within each sample see (Table. 3).

**Table 3. Properties and dimensions of the core category  
(stage three)**

<b>Sample</b>	<b>Property</b>	<b>Dimensional range</b>
Gang members	Resilience	Low
	Risk	High
Ex-gang/non-gang members	Resilience	High
	Risk	Low

## Findings

Of the significant overall observations that emerged in determining differences between gang members, ex-members<sup>7</sup> and non-members, edgework risk-taking was found to be one of the highly significant motivating drivers within the risk factor category that made young people vulnerable to gang membership.

In examining risk and protective factors involved in determining gang membership and non-membership on Merseyside, Hesketh (2018) has identified the allure of edgework risk-taking coupled with the seductive qualities of being bad as a significant contributor in deciding to join a street gang (or what Hesketh, 2018 terms a “Deviant Street Group” (DSG)). In applying Lyng’s first conceptual framework to young people who join gangs, Hesketh (2018) has noted support for Miller’s (2006) observations that young disenfranchised people are indeed living under the shadow of constraint both in terms of control caused by institutional forces and by austere policies that has resulted in even further inequality and social exclusion. In the United Kingdom, there is a history of the contemporary demonisation of young disenfranchised people. Since 1993 and the murder of Jamie Bulger, a catalyst in the introduction of the Crime and Disorder Act (1993) and many subsequent laws aimed at the policing of under 25s and their place and space, (Muncie, 2009), young people have become inherently scrutinised by the media, which has shaped attitudes by law enforcement and politics as well as initiated a myriad of “*gang talkers*” (Hallsworth and Young, 2008). The advent of austerity introduced in 2010 although already underway as early as 2008, saw areas already cut off from opportunity plummet further into the realms of marginalisation as local authorities were hit with over-excessive budget cuts.

### Edgework and male gang membership

During BNIM interviews with participants of the street gang sample, Hesketh (2018) noted, descriptions of criminality and anti-social behaviour that encompassed the edgework theme. The study noted, that one of the most intrinsically rewarding factors that appear to come from being part of a street gang of young males is a risk-taking element and the image of being “bad”. From this context, there was a considerable narrative that centred on “the buzz” (in many ways sexual as well). This ranged from the adrenaline rush gained before (in the run-up to (dressing the part, planning the event)), during the acts themselves to thoughts associated with the post-events. This was coupled with the actual status of being part of a known rogue element something particularly evident in the following participant narratives from five different street gang members around the Merseyside area:

“Started off doing petty little crimes, just smash and grabs, including cars with some little satnavs and that, then it just spiralled. You get deeper and deeper into the underworld of crime in Liverpool and the next thing you know you’re wrapped up in all the deep

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<sup>7</sup> Hesketh (2018) noted that while ex-members were found to have been initially attracted to gang membership as a result of the allure and excitement of risk-taking in addition to other variables, upon being exposed to instances of violence sought to quickly detach themselves from gang membership completely.

stuff. You do bigger things, you want more money ... then you get greedy ... Fire and passion to succeed and then when you get chased and that ... I think it's boss, exciting, money; it's everything, the ultimate 'buzz'. But when you get caught though, obviously, it's a different story, you always think to yourself, there's another day" (Anfield, Liverpool, Merseyside).

"It feels like an adrenalin rush ... you just buzz and you fly when you are doing it and if it goes good, you want to do it again. You think of the money, easy money" (Anfield, Liverpool, Merseyside).

"I would hang around on street corners with other groups, which were usually older and I looked up to them, I thought 'you know these are the type of people I want to be.' It was the image and the excitement" (Stockbridge Village, Knowsley, Merseyside).

"I got a bit of a reputation ... loads of people around Liverpool know me ... members of my family, one of them got stabbed in his leg on a bike, he was only 22, that was over a pedal bike in Canny Farm" (Cantril Farm now called Stockbridge Village, situated in Knowsley, Merseyside).

Loved going out with the lads at night. All I used to think about even when I went into school. It was just a buzz just going out doing stuff ... when you're doing something everything is pumping it's dead hard to describe" (Norris Green, Liverpool, Merseyside).

According to Garot (2015) "For action to be edgework, it must involve skill and control, not mere gambling or thrill-seeking. Edgeworkers carefully cultivate their skills, and then take great pleasure in pushing these skills to their limits" (p. 152). In sum, as Lyng (1990) observes "controlling the uncontrollable" (p. 872). For many of the young people who participated in the Merseyside study, the skill as edgeworkers was visible mainly on two levels. Firstly, there was the impression management and control of the experience, that is the actual dressing and talking that was characteristic of the young gang members in Liverpool. Skills that as Ferrell and Sanders (1995a) point out can have a considerable physiological effect on the whole body. In the case of male street gang members on Merseyside, it was the North Face hoodie (always up over the head), tracksuit bottoms and the Nike One Ten trainers completing the blacked out look of the young Liverpool street soldier. This was complemented by the broad and over-exaggerated Scouse accent that incorporated the word "lad"/"lid" after every sentence when talking to a fellow male peer,

emphasising a hyper-masculine image of badness that in many cases always included a discernible hatred and verbal damnation of the police Matrix patrols that identified affiliation and loyalty to the dark side. All of these descriptors not only required attributes for the wannabe gangbanger on the streets of Merseyside but also on an individual level sinisterly edgy and seductive.

Secondly, there was deviant entrepreneurship (Hesketh and Robinson, 2019) in which gang member participants developed entrepreneurial proficiency through illicit drug dealing activity. In using such skill, participants derived not only pleasure extrinsically, benefitting from the financial profiteering, but also, intrinsically, that is from the inner dark psychologically seductive experiences that such risk-taking created. This, Hesketh (2018) noted was in terms of such participants knowing they were identifying and being accepted as offenders/gang members/grafters<sup>8</sup> for which status was conferred by local peers and by young women and as a result of the pleasure gained from one-upmanship over law enforcement patrols. As Garot (2015, p.153) comments “edgeworkers are elitists, proud of how their highly honed skills allow them access to dimensions of experience where few dare to tread”. Moreover, interestingly, Sanchez-Jankowski (1991) and Padilla (1992) have observed gang-related edgework has been hard to identify by existing literature, although like Garot (2015) they both concede that such phenomenon as Hesketh (2018) observes is heavily linked to entrepreneurial survival measures in areas lacking economic opportunities” (p. 153).

#### Vicarious edgework and the female gang associate

Hesketh (2018) was able to possibly identify a new form of edgework behaviour in women of which could be termed ‘*vicarious edgework*’. From this perspective, male gang participants appeared to describe a social psychological process in which young women and girls derive their excitement indirectly through association (platonic in some cases, but mainly emotional) with known male street gang members, while at the same time avoiding the consequences of active street gang membership. This is highlighted here by participant narrative from two gang members whose narrative is particularly concerning in terms of the derogative way both view young women:

“I have shagged loads of girls. I think most of them like the challenge; it’s the bad boy thing init. They get off on it” (Kensington, Liverpool, Merseyside).

“Birds love it lad, they love the whole bad boy thing and any bird who says she doesn’t is a liar. Even posh birds. It’s their thing, they all get off on it, something

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<sup>8</sup> Grafters: a term originally used to denote individuals involved in legitimate forms of hard work but has been adopted by many (both adult and young people) involved in criminality. Hesketh and Robinson (2019) have noted that the term with offenders in Liverpool has become a way of neutralising offending behaviour (mainly drug-dealing) to a form of work (graft) as opposed to accepting such behaviour under the label of criminality. As a result, the boundaries between employment and criminality have in the eyes of such individuals become blurred.

about it to them” (Kensington, Liverpool, Merseyside).

Interestingly, research by Andell (2019) has noted a similar street-based derogatory attitude from gang-affiliated men were young women are concerned, he observes “these types of relationships appear to be defining characteristics of ‘street culture’ and are supported by the misogynistic lyrics of gangsta rap and the rapping and ‘spitting’ produced by gang-involved young men on YouTube and other social networking sites” (2019, p. 116). While it must be noted that Hesketh’s (2018) observations surrounding vicarious edgework derived from the narrative of male participants, initial piloting did involve interviews with several young women. While the number of female participants was insufficient to include in the published research to make any firm observations surrounding young women and gang membership, it was noted that these participants did support the assertions made by the young men that feature in the published study. These observations in particular, surrounded attraction to male gang members as the following narrative highlights:

“I do have an eye for the wrongins of this world. You get much more of a buzz with them than the normal type. They bore me shitless. Tried that with a lad from Manchester he was a straight head [crime and drug abstainer]. It lasted for two months, drove me around the bend. I am with a mad head now but if I become a solicitor, the fella is going to have to go or become boring or will need to find an ordinary lad again but what can I say every girl loves a bad boy!” (Girl, Croxteth, Liverpool).

I have always been around crime. My dad was into all sorts of shit. Then fellas I have had ... I have always been with wrongins, I don’t know why they just excite me, bit of a turn on. I can’t be with a normal nine to five lad, they just bore me. I have tried it, and it never works out. As soon as I get bored I start straying towards a wrongin again, but every girl likes a bad boy, that’s just the way it is. It’s been my downfall I suppose. Same with my mum she had an eye for bad lads and she is with one now. I think I get it from her” (Girl, the boundary within the borough of Knowsley).

#### Interventions covering gang-related edgework risk-taking

Presently, interventions on Merseyside covering gang involvement have been driven from within the Liverpool Families Programme, which was established in 2012 mainly as a result of a controversial central government policy called “*the Troubled Families Programme*” (Liverpool City Council, 2019). They include:

- The Families Strategic Group (FSG) – strategic representatives from Merseyside Police, health providers, probation, prison service, Liverpool Primary Headteachers Association, Association of Liverpool Special Schools Heads, Liverpool Learning Partnership, Liverpool Association of Secondary Headteachers, Children’s Services, Adults Services, Community Services, Public Health, Voluntary Services, and Housing providers.
- Family Intervention Programme team.
- Schools Family Support Service.
- Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH).
- Early Help Hubs and EHAT training.
- Enhanced Midwifery Team.
- School nursing posts (mental health expertise).
- MALS (Merseyside Mentor Achieve Learn Support) which reduces reoffending by improving offenders’ self-worth, self-motivation, desire to change and willingness to engage with agencies.

Of the interventions listed, it is the Family Intervention Programme team who works to prevent gang and gun crime. This is done through what they term a “support and challenge approach”. This includes the use of sanctions and hard enforcement as a deterrent to break away from gangs. Further, an organisation known as MALS (Mentor Achieve and Learn Support) has been set up to provide a service which attends schools, youth clubs and other establishments providing talks with young people on a variety of criminal activities including gang membership, anti-social behaviour and knives and guns. Also, within the third sector, a gym/boxing club located in the Anfield area of Merseyside includes a young person’s violent reduction programme, “#realmendontcarry knives”. Hesketh (2018) found that all of the interventions aimed at gangs and the violence that accompanies deviant street groups while utilising a variety of the approaches have not taken into full consideration the impact of risk-taking behaviour on vulnerable young people both young men and women.

## **Discussion**

Burfeind and Jeglum-Bartusch (2016) define a risk factor as “any individual trait, social influence, or environmental condition that leads to the greater likelihood of problem behaviours and ultimately negative developmental outcomes during the adolescent years” (p. 419). The greater the number of risk factors a young person possesses, the greater the possibility of not only gang membership but also violence and crime. Further, Burfeind and Jeglum-Bartusch (2016) identify two types of risk factor: *Static risk factors* are identified as those aspects that cannot be changed by any form of intervention strategy. They include early disruptive behaviour problems that include aggression and violent outbursts. In contrast, *dynamic risk factors* consist of environmental aspects that are changeable by forms of intervention. These can include involvement with deviant peer networks, low self-control and edgework risk-taking behaviour. In terms of the latter, despite the many criminological

theories used to explain the traditional motives for gang offending (dysfunctional family, marginalisation, drugs and alcohol, peer influence), most have tended to bypass risk-taking and thrill-seeking highlighted by Katz (1988), Lyng (1990) and Ferrell and Sanders (1995a).

The impact of austere policy over the last ten years has seen major cutbacks in leisure and social provision for young people in many marginalised areas of the UK including Merseyside. As a result, the rise of street gangs has become an increasingly prominent feature as young people constantly look for ways to escape both the boredom of social exclusion and increasing institutional constraint. As Young (2007) comments “the situation is one that creates structurally-based anomie in Merton’s sense of a strain between core societal values accepted by the many and legitimate access to the means of achieving them” (pp. 48-52).

The street gang member participants involved in the study by Hesketh (2018) have added up-dated credence to the observations made by both Katz (1988) and Lyng (1990). The study found evidence for the existence of risk-taking edgework on two levels.

Level one: Lyng’s original model involving young men in gang-related edgework

By using Lyng’s (1990) traditional edgework model, it has become possible to examine risk-taking behaviour in street gangs as Ferrell and Sanders (1995a) have done, applying the model both individually and collectively. Individually, Hesketh (2018) found that the criminal experience for many young disenfranchised people on Merseyside taken in its entirety (before, during and after) does indeed represent escapism and a form of cathartic self-empowerment from institutional constraint if only temporary. Moreover, importantly, it also highlights how such constraint impacts psychologically on young people to the extent that dangerous risk-taking behaviour has become attractive and furthermore darkly seductive. Moreover, at the time of writing, despite the number of family-orientated schemes that have emerged under the controversial troubled families programme, there are presently no interventions that provide a direct focus on what is becoming a highly concerning facet and motivational driver embedded in street gangs on Merseyside.

Collectively, as Ferrell and Sanders (1995a) observe the symbols and norms of a deviant subculture begin to emerge as the products of interaction between the like-minded edgeworkers who find belonging, unity, status and power in numbers. Once this occurs Ferrell and Sanders assert “and the subcultural reality arises in this emergent fashion, it begins to function as a unique collective strategy for resisting cultural domination” (p. 247). In the Merseyside study, Hesketh (2018) observed many instances of young males proudly wearing the North Face hooded jackets, tracksuit bottoms and Nike One Ten trainers that in numerous areas of North West England have become not only the defining deindividualised symbols of street gang us versus them unity but also, at the same time, fulfilling an internal pleasure seeking and criminally erotic desire to identify as being bad. Moreover, Hesketh (2018) also noted the part played by criminal activity, most notably the role of drugs as triggers of gang-related edgework experience. Ironically, this was not so much in the context of their physiological effect after consumption, but in the actual act of supplying as a result of learnt deviant entrepreneurial skill that became integrated within the appealing rogue identity of a drug dealer or “grafter”. Interestingly, Hesketh and Robinson (2019) assert that in some cases,

gang members who become disconnected with a group can and often do utilise their expertise in drug dealing as sole traders still deriving a “buzz” from the risk involved in risky cat-and-mouse one-upmanship with the police.

#### Level two: Vicarious edge work involving young women

On the second and more novel level, Hesketh (2018) identified a newer secondary form of edgework, that of vicarious edgework which was gained indirectly. It is a form of edgework in which female’s derived excitement through a relationship with a male street gang member. This toxic attraction to what female participants called “bad boys” or “wrongins” provides young women with the chance to metaphorically play with fire without getting burned and to explore the allure of risk and the eroticism surrounding it from a safe distance. Peripheral support for this dangerous liaison factor is only to be found in the work of Firmin (2011) but also Katz (2000) who targets the popularity of white gangsta rap artist Eminem as an example of how young women can be attracted to bad boys:

Boys and young men have long expressed frustration with the fact that girls and young women say they’re attracted to nice guys, but that the most popular girls often end with disdainful tough guys who treat them like dirt. We all know that heterosexual young guys are forever struggling to figure out what girls want. What are they supposed to conclude 53% of the 8-mile audience on opening weekend was female. (<http://www.jacksonkatz.com/.com/eminem2.html>).

Moreover, from a UK standpoint, research by Firmin (2010) which focused on interviews with 300 women, addressing the impact of serious youth violence and criminal gangs on women and girls across the UK included narrative from some of the female participants covered the sexual allure of risk through the attraction to “bad boys” (p. 38). In this limited section of her report, female participants appear to make similar comments:

“Cos they are ones with good looks and a good personality out there but it’s cos the good looking ones are also the bad ones” (Girl participant, Birmingham).

“Like if he could kill someone, or people thought he could, then yea I’m not gonna lie, he’s gonna be attractive to me” (Girl, Manchester).

Yea it is cos he’s taking chances with the law, like you like it, like saying oh yea I’ve gotta go and visit my boyfriend he’s inside, not on some stupid youth offending easy thing. (Girl, participant, Manchester).

While Firmin found evidence of young women being perpetrators, victims and partners, based on the testimony of male respondents in the Merseyside study, the girls involved in street gangs in Liverpool tend to be more on the peripheral side with loose affiliation, being attracted to a male who is a member of a gang as a result of their street status as a fighter or grafter (dealer). The young men, in turn, are quick to capitalise on this, in a process not unlike grooming, using displays of machismo and in some cases financial prowess to lure a female prey. Based on these observations, Hesketh (2018) suggests that young women who succumb to this form of male charisma may inadvertently be subjecting themselves to serious exploitation and violence. That is, many young women with connections to male gang members fail to recognise sexual violence and abuse with some quite willing normalise it rather than run the risk of losing the excitement as well as the peer conferred status of being a girlfriend to a street cred bad boy involved in gangs and crime. Thus, this study calls for further in-depth research into this particular concerning aspect of edgework. This should involve a combination of samples of both young men and women with experiences of street gangs.

Clearly, there is an urgent need for further inquiry into both forms of edgework. Only through such enquiry can effective intervention be integrated into multi-agency policy which at present has neglected this highly impulsive aspect of gangs and youth crime. The question of how an individual, who experiences criminal risk-taking behaviour as pleasurable and intrinsically rewarding, can be brought back to the normality and indeed the banality of life in a marginalised community must be addressed. This is even more so if the criminality element also brings with it further extrinsic rewards of high income through deviant entrepreneurial skills such as drug dealing. Moreover, such approaches should also consider the specific locations of gang prevalence and the social issues that are specifically rooted in each area. As Hesketh (2018) asserts, it is not enough to simply regard such a powerful motivational driver as the product of individual predisposition.

## **Conclusion**

Cultural Criminology has explored the theory of edgework, which involves the idea of voluntary risk-taking and the examination of its seductive nature, the chasing of danger that borders the boundaries of legal and illegal behaviour. In interviews with street gang members on Merseyside, Hesketh (2018) has found support for the existence of forms of criminal edgework risk-taking behaviour being an instrumental motivational driver for street gang involvement on Merseyside. The study noted, that the most intrinsically rewarding factors that appear to come from being part of a street gang for young males are the image of badness combined with the excitement (adrenaline rush) of risk-taking with its ability to provide temporary escapism from the institutional restraint. This was observed to be reflected in the dressing, walking and talking that conformed to what is the dominant peer construction of a street gang on Merseyside. This involved the wearing of North Face all black clothing with Nike One-Ten trainers, the use of an exaggerated hyper-masculine Scouse accent infused with the word “lad”/”lid” at the end of every sentence. Coupled with this, was deviant entrepreneurial skill development (Hesketh and Robinson (2019) mainly through grafting

(drug dealing)) which was passed down from the elders to younger and formed the springboard for ultimate edgework risk-taking performance.

Particularly concerning, was the narrative on what Hesketh (2018) identified as another form of edgework, what he termed “vicarious edgework” which emerged during interviews with some of the street gang members. This was a form of risk-taking which allegedly sees young women attracted to the “bad boy” type of male to derive a form of excitement by proxy while at the same time, maintaining their law-abiding status. However, as already noted, while further research involving young women is required to make any real empirical assertions, interviews carried out with a small number of young women on Merseyside during the piloting stage of the research did provide some confirmation of the narrative discussed by the young men featured in the study. Moreover, the work of Firmin (2011) has observed such a phenomenon, but failed to address it with any real concern.

Further, today, it would appear that the desire to commit risk-taking behaviour through the commission of crime via street gang membership can become even more appealing when individuals undergo deindividuation, that is, anonymisation as a result of joining groups. The notion is best illustrated by Clarke (2003), who comments:

The theory is that in a large crowd each person is nameless and personal responsibility is diffused, as each is faceless and anonymous. There is a diminished fear of retribution and a diluted sense of guilt. The larger the group the greater the anonymity and the more difficult the identification of a single individual (p. 93).

Hesketh (2018) has set the foundations for future research by observing the considerable stranglehold edgework has on young people living in marginalised areas. At the time of writing; this area of study has been overlooked with such neglect of risk-taking also having been noted in the forms of gang/youth crime interventions. Thus, Hesketh (2018) calls for further in-depth research in this area, since only from further inquiry can the effective intervention be integrated into more macro/structural centred multi-agency policy. The question of how an individual, who experiences criminal risk-taking behaviour as pleasurable and intrinsically rewarding, can be brought back to the normality must be addressed. This is even more so if this street gang type edgework also brings with it extrinsic rewards of high income through deviant entrepreneurship (Hesketh and Robinson, 2019). Future projects could include looking at potential countermeasures that could focus on developmental psycho (cognitive) /social interventions<sup>9</sup> designed to counter the phenomenon of edgework risk-taking, thrill-seeking and criminological eroticism derived from being bad or as in the case of young women (identified indirectly) being drawn towards

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<sup>9</sup> Hesketh (2018) did note that during interviews with street gang members who spoke of edgework type risk behaviour, remorse appeared to be at its most effective when participants spoke of the shame and embarrassment they felt having their gang involvement and criminal activity exposed to family members once caught by law enforcement.

badness by association, the latter of which however, as has been repeatedly emphasised does require further empirical enquiry with young people involved with street gangs of both sexes.

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