

Research Articles

Psychological and Criminogenic Factors Underlying Gangsterism Among Indians in Malaysia From the Perspective of Ex-Gangsters and Police Personnel

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Abstract

In recent years, gangsterism and gang related activities among Indians are perplexing and alarming. Although this issue is considered as an old phenomenon, researches related to underlying factors for gangsterism are still lacking. With this in mind, this study aimed to explore psychological and criminogenic factors behind gangsterism among Indians in Malaysia. This study utilized a non-experimental research design. This study is a qualitative research (semi-structured, face-to-face individual interview guide) that makes use of the inductive approach based on a combination of subjectivism and interpretivist philosophies. Six ex-gangsters and four police personnel were interviewed; and their experiences of gangsterism were used to gain a reality-based understanding regarding the factors underlying gangsterism. The thematic analyses generated three psychological factors (negative emotional responses, low self-control, and high impulsivity) and three criminogenic factors (substance abuse, having antisocial peers, and dysfunctional families). One new theme emerged: monetary gain, with three sub-themes (ease of obtaining money, amount and immediacy, and benefits derived from illegal monetary gains). The outcome of this explorative research provides insight to the growing body of knowledge on gangsterism in Malaysia and is useful for community leaders and law enforcement agencies to strategize appropriate intervention, prevention, and suppression efforts to combat gangsterism.

Keywords: criminogenic factors, ex-gangsters, gangsterism, police personnel, psychological factors, thematic analysis

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Gangsterism was not considered as a common issue in Malaysia until recently. The re-emergence of gang-related activities by violent gangs since 2013 (Ahmad Zahid, 2014), for example gang-motivated assassination cases, armed gang robberies, gang fights and drug-related crimes; have prompted increased serious proactive and reactive actions against these illegal gangs. Official news and social media coverage depict that acts of gangsterism in Malaysia are more prolific and more violent than before; appearing to be particularly worrisome among Indian youths.

There is no agreed definition of 'gangs' or 'gangsterism'. In general, gangsterism can be defined as a violent phenomenon involved by a group of people whose main reason for existence is to commit criminal acts and violent acts (MacMaster, 2010). The criminal acts or illegal acts include: armed robbery, street fight, gang fight, theft, vehicle theft, extortion, drugs related crimes, secret society dealings, illegal security services, kidnapping, murder, brothel, hijacking, illegal money laundering, and smuggling. Gangsterism can lead to some serious negative impacts (e.g severe trauma, loss of lives, loss of property, and mugged many young people of an opportunity to develop their talent) on young people, children, as well as on whole communities which can erode the well-being of a nation (De Wet, 2016; Maphalala & Mabunda 2014; Naidoo & Naidoo, 2016; Pitso et al., 2014).

Authors and agencies differ in the way gangs are classified. According to Taylor (1990), gangs can be categorised into three main categories based on distinguishing characteristics. The first category is corporate gangs, focusing on making money (Taylor, 1990). The criminal activities committed by members are only for illegal personal or group profit. The second category is territorial gangs. Such gangs concentrate on possessing territory where the members use violence to control, secure or protect their gang's possessions (Taylor, 1990). Members commonly refer to their gangs as brotherhoods, sharing similar sociodemography backgrounds and interests. The third category is scavenger gangs, which have very minimal organizational structure. Typically, the motivation of an individual to join this gang is because of their own personal needs (Taylor, 1990). Members are prone to violent and erratic behaviors (Taylor, 1990).

Klein (2001) provided a five-point typology of Street Gangs (Pitts, 2007). The five types are: traditional, neotraditional, compressed, collective, and specialty (Pitts, 2007). More recently in 2007, the Organization of American States (OAS) reported a useful typology of gangs that include five categories of gangs (Jones, 2013). The five categories of the gangs are scavenger, transgressor or youth, violent, criminal, and female (Jones, 2013). However, for the purpose of this paper, the classification by the Royal Malaysia Police (RMP) is used. Based on subsection 5(1) of the Societies Act 1966, the RMP classify gangs into three categories with specific criteria (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2013). The three categories are thugs, secret societies, and triads.

According to the RMP (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2013), the following are some of the characteristics of thug groups: small groups which are not organized, do not have any documented rules, and have a loose leadership. Thugs may group together to create nuisance or commit crimes which are often violent in nature. These groups can become big and transform into organized gangs if no preventive actions are taken. The second category is secret societies. The RMP (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2013), includes the following when determining a gang as being a secret society: secret societies have subscription fees, and are more organized, but do not practice triad traditions or rituals. Members of these groups are usually young people. Crime activities engaged by these gangs are visible, identifiable, and violent. What clearly differentiates thug groups from secret societies is that secret societies may form branches or sub-groups, that are expected to merge as necessary with the "parent body".

The last category is triads. According to the RMP (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2013), triads are well organized groups and have specific rules, regulations, and punishments. These groups carry out initiation ceremonies with oath-takings to recruit full-fledged members. Triads have their own emblems, secret signs, codes and subscription fees. Triads have their own hierarchy systems. These characteristics clearly differentiate it from thug groups and secret societies.

Data obtained from the RMP indicated that around 15% of juvenile delinquents were Indians (Yahya & Kaur, 2010). A report by Nizarazu (2013), provided some evidence that the Indian community have the highest rate of gangsterism compared to other ethnicities in Malaysia. According to the Ministry of Home Affairs (2017), 49 gangs have been identified as threatening public safety, and around 71.75% of the identified gangsters are Indians. Muhammad Amin, Mohammad Rahim, and Geshina Ayu (2014) and Surendra (2014) found that about 40% of serious crimes i.e. violent crimes in Malaysia were committed by Indians.

The above figures are relevant as Malaysia is home to around 1,988,000 people of Indian origin (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2017). This has led to a worrying problem among the Indian community because many of their youths appear to be following the wrong path that can negatively impact their social and economic status. These figures suggest that there is a need to study the phenomena of gangsterism among Malaysian Indians.

Furthermore, the nation was shocked and perplexed with public nuisance activities carried out by Indian students who have been recognized as newly recruited gang members of several Indian gangs as these activities were reported in main stream media and the video of these activities were viral in social media (Mohd, 2017; Zack, 2017). Several notable public nuisance activities carried out by the Indian students were: cutting cakes that symbolizes their respective gang's number, blocking roads and traffic, playing firecrackers on the road, and other aggressive acts with motorcycles; to gain attention from the public (Mohd, 2017; Zack, 2017).

Having said that, it appears that gangsterism have penetrated among Indian students as their recruitment into gangs are actively carried out by the respective gang members. These nuisance acts received acute attention of public and community leaders as these acts were carried out in public areas and to be more precise, just right in front of the students' school compound. It is therefore imperative to formulate effective strategies to curb these activities as these may harm the public and have the potential to erode the image and well-being of Indian society. To that end, this paper focuses on the psychological and criminogenic factors underlying gangsterism among Indians in Malaysia.

Method

Study Design and Participants

The research design that was used in this study was a non-experimental research design. It is a qualitative research that makes use of the inductive approach by employing an in-depth interview method. Six ex-gangsters and four police personnel were interviewed and their experiences of gangsterism were used to gain a reality-based understanding regarding the factors underlying gangsterism.

Ethical approval to conduct this study was applied through *Jawatankuasa Etika Penyelidikan Manusia Universiti Sains Malaysia* (JEPeM). The study protocol code for this study is USM/JEPeM 16120580. This was in order to conduct this research ethically where the rights of participants are safeguarded, researcher's safety is considered, and that this study follows Universiti Sains Malaysia codes of ethical conduct.

The study location for this research was largely dependent on the participants' residence and availability. The first group of the sample who are ex-gangsters; were approached once they were identified via members of the neighborhood, friends, and several non-government organizations. The contact details of ex-gangsters were

gathered. Twenty potential research participants were approached one by one through a phone call, Facebook or WhatsApp. After potential research participants agreed for an interview session, a suitable date, time and place were arranged to carry out the interview session. The final number of ex-gangsters who completed the interviews were six men and the rest did not agree to participate.

The second group of the sample in this research was Police officers. Police personnel were approached through the RMP. Details of police officers who were suitable or qualified (vast experience in handling gangsterism related cases) for this study were given by Unit D7A (Secret Society), Criminal Investigation Division (CID) of RMP. Then, they were approached through a phone call or WhatsApp. The interview session was fixed based on their availability and willingness to share their experiences. Four police personnel finally agreed to participate. As such, the sample for this study was purposive in nature and not in a random manner.

Participation was on a voluntary basis and did not involve any monetary benefits. A Participation Information Sheet and Participant Consent Form was provided to potential participants so that they were aware of their rights and what their involvement in the study would entail. Their identity and responses were portrayed as anonymous and kept secret in order to encourage the integrity of responses. Participants were informed regarding the disposal of the given information at the end of the interviews.

The confidentiality of information was maintained throughout the study through the use of codes and restricted access. A written agreement was signed by the researcher to state that the researcher promises not to share the identities of the participants to any party. Participants were allowed to withdraw their participation at any time during the collection of data. Potential participants who agreed to participate signed a Participant Consent Form prior to the interviews. The entire in-depth interview sessions were audio recorded using a recorder device. The interview sessions were facilitated and more information were microscopically explored by using qualitative probing techniques.

Research Instrument and Analyses

The research instrument used in this qualitative research was an open-ended, face-to-face individual interview guide. The interview guides for both groups of participants differ slightly in terms of their involvement in gangster-related activities. The interview guide for ex-gangsters was labeled as IG-XG and the interview guide for police personnel was labeled as IG-P. The questions were developed based on the researchers' experiences as well as previous relevant literature regarding gangsterism. All the questions were content validated and endorsed by two subject matter experts. [Table 1](#) below depicts the themes and sub-themes explored as they relate to psychological and criminogenic factors. Emerged themes and sub-themes were generated from the raw transcripts. N-Vivo 10.0 was used to organize, code, and extract relevant information from the qualitative data.

All the themes and sub-themes were identified and analyzed by using thematic analyses. According to [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#) thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting themes within data. This method can also be utilized to link the various concepts and opinions of the participants ([Braun & Clarke, 2006](#)). [Aronson \(1995\)](#) highlighted the important steps in the thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and report the themes within data.

According to [Aronson \(1995\)](#), the primary step is to collect the data from the interview sessions. The second step is to identify data that relate to the already classified themes. Next step is related patterns will be com-

Table 1

Psychological and Criminogenic Themes Underlying Gangsterism

Main themes / Emerged sub-themes
Psychological factors
Negative emotional responses
Low self-control
High impulsivity
Criminogenic factors
Substance abuse
Having antisocial peers
Dysfunctional families
Monetary gain (Emerged factors)
Amount and immediacy
Benefits derived from illegal
Monetary gains

bined and categorized into sub-themes. The final step is to develop a valid argument for selecting the themes and develop a storyline after the completion of the themes and review of the literature.

Results and Discussion

Psychological Factors

Many researchers found that psychological characteristics are powerful elements in gang membership (Alleyne & Wood 2010). According to the Interactional Theory (Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003), psychological factors such as aggression, low self-control, and high impulsivity are salient psychology triggers that are linked to gang membership. This current study provides some support for Thornberry et al.'s (2003) claims. Psychological factors are not only linked to gang membership but also strongly linked with criminal behavior. A review paper by Mohammad Rahim, Nadiah Syariani, Azizah, Khaidzir, and Geshina Ayu (2015a) asserted the strong relationships between psychological factors and criminal behavior as the negative psychological factors are viewed as basic ingredients of crime and criminal behavior. Three psychological factors were derived from participant responses: negative emotional responses, low self-control, and high impulsivity.

Psychological Factor: Negative Emotional Responses

Positive emotions and negative emotions are the groups of emotions that can be categorized from our human emotions. Emotional conditions are the results that human beings face during various situations such as dispositions, interpersonal relations or interactions with other things (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007); that they come across in daily environments. Daily activities and situations can induce negative emotions such as frustration, anger, disbelief, sadness, or fear.

Negative emotional responses were expressed by most of the ex-gangsters when describing the actions of gangsters. One of the prominent negative emotional response that was shown by the ex-gangsters was aggression. According to Baron and Richardson (1994), aggression is defined as behavior that is intended to cause harm to another individual. Aggression has been linked to various factors such as instinct (Munsaka,

2014), hormonal imbalance such as high levels of testosterone and low levels of neurotransmitters (Dabbs, Riad, & Chance, 2001), genetic factors (Jones & Goldsmith, 2005), blood chemistry, physiological illness and temperament, psychological frustrations, social learning (Anderson & Bushman, 2002), and deindividuation.

According to Mohammad Rahim (2014), studies by Feshbach (1964), Huesmann and Miller (1994), Anderson and Bushman (2002) addressed violence and crime as the product of aggression. Local quantitative studies by Mohammad Rahim et al. (2014a; 2014b; 2015b) and Mohammad Rahim, Azizah, Khaidzir, and Geshina Ayu (2016) revealed that aggression is one of the common psychological traits that is very much prevalent among Malaysian inmates and significantly correlated with other negative psychological variables. Thornberry et al.'s (2003) study asserted that aggression is one of the psychological factors linked to gang membership. The police personnel in this study also stated that gangs and gangsters are aggressive. The ex-gangsters who were interviewed admitted to using physical aggression as a problem-solving technique and as a tool to control and instill fear in others.

"I'll make sure that the particular person won't repeat his mistakes. My best friend and I killed his girlfriend's father because he continuously caused trouble for us... But, later on, I controlled my anger and stopped to use physical aggression to hurt others". (R-XG 4)

Most of the ex-gangsters also agreed that poor anger management led to unwanted outcomes. Some of the ex-gangsters said that they were only able to think clearly and calmly after the incident. Few experienced little or no remorse, for their mistreatment of others.

"I engaged in 'Gang XX' to take revenge on people who robbed me... I wanted to hurt them so that others won't be affected by them..." (R-XG 1).

Psychological Factor: Low Self-Control

According to Baumeister, Heatherton, and Tice (1994), self-control describes an individual's capacity to overcome and inhibit socially unacceptable and undesirable impulses. Many studies (e.g., Arneklev, Grasmick, Tittle, & Bursik, 1993; Hay & Forrest, 2008; Payne, Higgins, & Blackwell, 2010; Mohammad Rahim et al., 2014b, 2015b; Wright, Caspi, Moffitt, & Silva, 1999) claimed that low self-control is a consistent, potential, and prominent trigger for both criminal and violent behaviors. Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) suggested that individuals lacking in self-control exhibit signs of risk-taking, adventurous, short-sightedness, impulsiveness, and are insensitive to others.

The ex-gangsters in this study demonstrated themselves as individuals with low self-control. This current study found that individuals with low self-control are not only prone to gang membership, but they also engage in various criminal activities. This finding supports the assertion made by Alleyne and Wood (2010) and Thornberry et al. (2003), in which low self-control is one of the psychological factors that are linked with gang membership.

Some of the ex-gangsters who were interviewed mentioned that they took several years to leave the gang because they were too attached to the gang and gang members. They also mentioned that because of their poor self-control, they continuously got involved in gang-related activities so that they can earn illegal money. Ex-gangsters admitted to having difficulties in controlling aggressive behaviors. Episodes of unpredictable physical aggression previously shown by ex-gangsters made people around them feel scared and in distress. This was perceived as a way to show power and control people.

“Before I spent my eight years in prison, I found it more difficult to control my anger and actions... I didn’t talk too much... I hit them straight away without asking their problems... If they never realised their problems, I continued to hurt them”. (R-XG 3)

“Majority of the gangsters are not capable of controlling themselves. They are the individuals who have low self control, easily engage in various crime activities without thinking the consequences..” (R-XG4)

Psychological Factor: High Impulsivity

The third psychological factor is high impulsivity. According to [Hinslie and Shatzky \(1940\)](#), impulsivity is defined as the lack of ability to clearly think out one’s actions before performing them. Impulsivity can be further explained as the actions that are poorly conceived, prematurely expressed, unduly risky, or inappropriate to the situation and that often result in undesirable behaviors ([Evenden, 1999](#)). High-impulsivity can prevent someone from conforming to social norms and laws, can lead them to show a reckless disregard for others’ safety, and experience little or no remorse for their mistreatment of others to gain immediate gratification ([Shankar, 2017](#)).

During the interviews, the ex-gangsters portrayed themselves as individuals who carried out actions without thinking about the consequences. Some ex-gangsters admitted that high-impulsivity made them fail to conform to social norms and laws, and showed a reckless disregard for others’ safety.

“I was involved in drug distribution under Gang XX when I was in Form 3, where I never thought that I could be arrested by police... I did not bother about the consequences of distributing drugs. At that moment, the pleasure and rewards seemed to be more important for me but I regretted my action when I got caught for the first time by Royal Malaysia Police” (R-XG 6).

“During school days, I knew that being engaged in gangs is illegal but I actively participated in gang-related activities such as extortion, gang fight, and secret dealing without any regret because I enjoyed that” (R-XG 5).

Past researchers claimed that impulsivity has been linked to substance abuse/dependence and suicide ([Zimmerman, 2010](#)), delinquency in childhood and adulthood ([Farrington, Loeber, & Van Kammen, 1990](#)), as well as anger ([Shorey, Brasfield, Febres, & Stuart, 2011](#)), aggressiveness ([McGirr & Turecki, 2007](#)), and violence ([Scarpa & Raine, 2000](#)) and murder ([Mohammad Rahim et al., 2014c](#)). [Eysenck’s \(1979\)](#) personality theory relates impulsivity to offending through conditionability. [Zimmerman \(2010\)](#), asserted that children and young adolescents failed to associate antisocial behaviors with pain and fear arousal because of the poor conditionability, along with sociability (extroversion), neuroticism, and psychoticism.

Criminogenic Factors

In general, criminogenic factors can be viewed as main changeable risk factors for criminal behavior that do not include symptoms of mental illnesses which can predict various measures of recidivism ([Prins, Skeem, Mauro, & Link, 2015](#)). The available literature indicates that criminogenic factors also play a significant role in gang membership and gangster-related activities ([Laws, 2016](#); [Snacken, Bauwens, Van Zyl Smit, Tournel, & Machiels, 2013](#); [Wood, 2014](#)). [Wood \(2014\)](#) in particular, suggested that compliance to group norms may cultivate gang members’ social cognitions such as moral disengagement and cognitions in support of offensive behaviors. The criminogenic factors that were explored in this current study were substance abuse, having antisocial peers, and dysfunctional families.

Criminogenic Factor: Substance Abuse

Substance abuse refers to the “harmful or hazardous use of psychoactive substances, including alcohol and illicit drugs” (World Health Organization, 2017). Sanders (2012) and Coffman, Melde, and Esbensen (2015), found that gang membership is an indicator of chronic substance use. In addition, Decker (2000), Mouttapa et al. (2010), and Chetty (2017), reported that substance use in the form of alcohol, drugs, or both, is prolific in youth gangs. As such, there appears to be a relationship between substance use and gang membership, whereby due to gang membership, an individual is at higher risk of getting involved in the consumption of illegal substances, or that consumption of illegal substance leads an individual to join a gang in order to be with other individuals sharing similar behaviors and interests.

In this current study, alcohol and drugs are the substance abuses that were identified among the ex-gangsters. This study also discovered that initially the Indian gang members used marijuana, but now they use other drugs, especially heroin and methamphetamine. The change from marijuana to heroin and methamphetamine is due to several reasons. The first reason is the availability of different kinds of methamphetamine in the drugs market. According to ex-gangsters, gangsters can easily obtain different kinds of methamphetamine via various channels, forms, and amount.

As for the second reason, the interviewed ex-gangsters mentioned that current laws cannot control the illegal drug business in Malaysia as newer and unlisted drugs i.e. new psychoactive substances, are produced at a rapid rate. Examples of such laws include the Dangerous Drugs Act 1952 (DDA) (Act 234), Penal Code (Act 574), and the Prevention of Crime Act (POCA) (Act 297). Narcotics Criminal Investigation Department (NCID) of RMP, and the establishment of Special Tactics and Intelligence Narcotics Group (STING) under the command of NCID, carry out frequent operations and raids, yet the production and usage of illegal drugs continue unabated.

“Indians started to involve in this illegal drug business since 1987 when the Indian gangs were well established in this country... They started to add adulterants in drugs to gain more profit... Last time, they sold heroin, now they are selling methamphetamine drugs...Even though RMP is taking maximum initiatives to curb the drug business in Malaysia but for us, nothing has changed...” (R-XG 6)

As for the third reason, the number of drug offences and drug-related offences are varied and appear to be increasing annually, to the extent that most crimes are drug-related (narcotic-related crimes). For example, robbery and drug consumption, murder and drug distribution, and vehicle theft and drug distribution. Previous criminal actions by the ex-gangsters provide support for the combination of crimes committed in concert or sequentially.

An interesting finding in this current study was that most of the ex-gangsters who consumed the illicit substance admitted that the onset as being during early adolescence or early adulthood. Most of them mentioned that they started to consume alcohol because of their friends’ influence. Friendship made them consume alcohol for the first time, then they continued consuming alcohol for fun or to maintain friendships, but at the end, they became addicted to alcohol.

Another finding related to this theme of substance abuse was when drugs, alcohol or both, were consumed. Some of the ex-gangsters claimed that they were under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs during the commission of violent acts, for example in the process of grievously harming someone. The inputs from the ex-

gangsters indicated a strong link between alcohol use and violence. Alcohol consumption has been found to be an important ingredient, as well as a triggering factor in violent incidents (Room & Rossow, 2001) because of its dis-inhibiting effects which have the possible chance to change the individuals' perception of risk (Bushman, 1997). Example responses from two ex-gangsters support this assertion.

"If I did not take alcohol on that day I would not act in that way (murder). Not only me but many gangsters will consume alcohol before engaging in the gang fight, street fight, robbery, and murder. The gangsters believe that alcohol can give them unlimited strength and can boost their braveness" (R-XG 4).

"Before involved in any street and gang fights, I took marijuana so that I can act violently without thinking. It makes me braver" (R-XG 1).

Criminogenic Factor: Having Antisocial Peers

In this current study, it was found that amongst the ex-gangsters, having antisocial peers was influential towards crime and gang participation. The ex-gangsters reported having a close attachment with antisocial peers whom they befriended since childhood. Their closeness with the antisocial peers provided the environment where they shared the same values, beliefs, motives, attitudes, and interests; that encouraged them to get involved in gangs and crimes. This suggests that the adolescents' gang membership and delinquency rely on the number of antisocial peers, the closeness of the relationship, and frequency of time spent together with antisocial peers.

"All my friends are gangsters... I knew them since Form 1... Most of them are still active in gangs and involved in gang-related crime activities... even some of them were arrested by police several times" (R-XG 2).

"I have a best friend... We were friends from secondary school... We did almost everything together... He was the one who got involved in gang activities and because of him only I indirectly involved in a murder case..." (R XG- 3).

Police personnel in this study claimed that nowadays teenagers spend more time with their antisocial friends than with their parents or other influential adults causing disengagement with their parents and family members. Several kinds of literature debated on the mechanism of antisocial peers in gang membership. According to Gilman, Hill, Hawkins, Howell, and Kosterman (2014), and Wortham (2015), peer pressure by antisocial peers can influence the teenagers to do things they would not normally do, most of which are negative such as having sex at the early age, drinking alcohol, smoking, and drug abuse. Young, Fitzgibbon, and Silverstone (2013) claimed that peer pressure increased the number of peripheral gang activities, which could then develop into more significant gang membership. Two police personnel describe this criminogenic factor as follows:

"If their friends are good and educated it's not a big problem... but if they have delinquent friends... especially gang members ... then it's a risky situation for them..." (R-P1).

"Usually delinquent friends use various methods to influence their friends... They usually convince, give fake promises, and cheat them in many ways so that their friends will join their activities and gang... Some of them asked their friends to involve in their gang so that they can maintain their brotherhood relationship and spend time together" (R-P2).

The present findings add to the current knowledge by articulating commitment and interaction with negative peers, as well as avoiding contact with positive peers; as predictors of gang involvement (Klemp-North, 2007). Previous findings (Sharp, Aldridge, & Medina, 2006; Thornberry et al., 2003) based on the Interactional Theory, also support the current finding which reaffirm antisocial peers and pressure from these peers increases the likelihood of gang membership.

Criminogenic Factor: Dysfunctional Families

Next, most of the police personnel strongly felt that family dysfunction plays a big role in facilitating gang membership. Families experiencing multiple difficulties such as economic deprivation, family separation, bereavement, domestic violence, imprisonment, and alcohol and substance misuse; appear to contribute to an individual's negative, harmful ways of thinking and acting. According to McNeil, Herschberger, and Nedela (2013), and Gilman et al. (2014), youths may join gangs because of its supportive features that youths cannot obtain in their own families. In some instances, older male family members were the catalyst for youths to join gangs (Robb, Featherstone, Ruxton, & Ward, 2017).

“Family environment is really important... Most of the gangsters are from broken families... Individuals who are from broken families usually won't have a good relationship and attachment with their family members... Problems in a family can cause that person to be stressed and depressed. In addition, if an individual observed violence in his/her family that particular person can be violent too and involved in the gangs to show their anger and stress” (R-P1).

“I have an uncle who was a member of gang XX... He was the one who asked me to sell the drugs to my friends... After two weeks he asked me to join his gang and gave me a good position in that gang” (R-XG 6).

Research on the relationship between familial problems and juvenile delinquency, including gang membership, is not new. Hirschi (1969) for example found that family dysfunction may weaken attachment to the family, and subsequently, young people are more likely to deviate and become involved in crime. According to Tapia-Conyer, Cravioto, Rosa, and Velez (1995), dysfunctional family background and abusive parents were risk factors that increased the likelihood of juvenile delinquency. Hill, Howell, Hawkins, and Battin-Pearson (1999) provided some evidence that negative or problematic family structures predicted gang membership, especially parental favourable attitudes towards violence. Therefore, dysfunctional family circumstances or relationships may increase the vulnerability of young family members to develop friendships with delinquent or antisocial peers.

Emerged Factor

Other than the above identified factors, a new emerged factor underlying gangsterism was derived from participants' responses. The emerged factor pertained to obtaining monetary gain. This is discussed under the following: ease of obtaining money, amount and immediacy, and benefits derived from illegal monetary gains.

Emerged Factor: Amount and Immediacy of Monetary Gain

According to the majority of participants, monetary gain from gang-related activities is high and immediate with minimal effort. Monetary gain appears to be related to financial difficulties, rather than greed. Most of them mentioned that Indians who get involved in gangs are individuals experiencing financial difficulties due to circumstances and lack of better opportunities. As mentioned by Jayasooria and Nathan (2016), financial difficul-

ties due to circumstances and lack of better opportunities resulted in undesirable social consequences including a gravitation towards crime and gangsterism.

Jayasooria and Nathan (2016) stated that initially, the Indian community stayed in estates or plantations. Over time, the Indians migrated from estates to urban squatters or flats. This was largely due to displacement from plantation employment. Indians lived in poverty when they were in estates, but at least they had jobs with monthly salaries. After Indians migrated to urban areas, they lost their meager job and continued to live in poverty. This displacement caused the breakdown of social controls and the social support system (Sidhu, 2005).

The living expenses in cities are also very high compared to their previous places and the Indian people found less opportunities to gain legal employment (Jayasooria & Nathan, 2016) that paid well and was constant due to their different existing skill set. Subsequently, Indians engaged in gangs and gang-related activities to earn money to save their family from poverty. Membership in gangs were sustained so that they can earn more and consistently.

“... they involve in illegal activities to earn a large amount of money...A group of drug dealers can earn more than a hundred thousand ringgit per day” (R-P2).

“Most of the time I regret it and wanted to stop but it is very hard to stop...This is because I earn a lot in this business and I have nothing to lose” (R-XG 6).

Emerged Factor: Benefits Derived From Illegal Monetary Gains

With regards to monetary gain, the police personnel who were interviewed claimed that they came across gangsters who had been arrested several times for similar offenses. According to the police personnel, gangsters persist in their activities to gain illegal profits as they want to continue their luxurious lifestyles. There is some support of this in the available literature. For example, Howell and Egley (2005), and Mitchell and Pyrooz (2016) found that perceived benefits are a strong predictor for gang membership.

In addition, according to the ex-gangsters, certain gangs provide good offers to their members. They let their members conduct businesses under their name, give them shares from extortion money, and give salary, car, and motorcycle to their members. Based on such benefits, people are likely to continue being part of the gang, even when they knew that being a member of a gang despite non-involvement in illegal activities, is still considered as an offense in Malaysia. The benefits outweigh the punishment – which may or may not happen later.

“I almost earned minimum RM5000 per month from selling drugs... This job offered larger benefits effortlessly... That is the reason why I am so into this gang activities” (R-XG 6).

“Monthly...my boss will give share from the extortion money that I collected... I earned RM5000...My work was so simple... I only need to collect protection money from the shops, stalls and other business places...”. (R-XG 2)

According to the ex-gangsters who were interviewed in this current study, gang members are hesitant to exit their gangs because they will not be able to sustain the benefits derived from illegal monetary gains. These benefits include better homes and belongings, access to public and private healthcare services, options for private education, and collection of personal and collective wealth. In other words, with the changes in lifestyle that a higher ‘income’ brings, including exiting poverty and having better life opportunities for themselves and

family members, gangsters choose to continue committing crimes. What this points out to, is that the police personnel's assertion of sustaining better lifestyles is supported by the personal admissions of ex-gangsters.

Reality of Gangsterism in Malaysia

Obtaining insights from both lawbreakers and law enforcers would enable a more holistic understanding about gangsterism in Malaysia. This is opposed to the singular group focus of many previous studies and can fill some of the gaps in knowledge. Gangsterism is still a serious problem in Malaysia. The existence of gangsterism can be observed through various gang-related activities reported in the media and reported to the police.

Most of the participants especially the ex-gangsters, claimed that the status of gangsterism among Indians is still high and has increased compared to previous years. They claimed that the involvement of Indian youths in gangs are very high and they are very violent. These findings may differ from other studies due to unreported cases, youths being under the radar, the reality of being surrounded by other gangsters or staying in pro-gangster areas, or law-breaking classified as another type of crime other than gangster-related.

Nonetheless, RMP continuously plan and enforce many safety prevention measures to control this issue. For example, special operations were carried out in the name of 'Ops Cantas' and 'Ops Cantas Khas' in several states in the past few years. The reasons behind these operations were to reduce the crime rate and gang-related activities. These operations seemed to be successful with the arrest of many gangsters. In 2013, almost 304 gang members were arrested by RMP in 'Ops Cantas' (["Arrests Statistics of Ops Cantas Operation", 2013](#)). As many as 114 triad members have been detained all over the country during *Operasi Cantas Khas* (Organized Crime) since 2015 ([Malaysian Digest, 2017](#)).

In addition, new amendments were made to POCA and SOSMA. Special Task Force For Anti Vice, Gaming, And Gangsterism (STAGG), and Special Task Force On Organized Crime (STAFOC) under the command of CID of RMP to curb gangsterism in Malaysia were established. The police personnel who were interviewed, provided statistics which indicated that the gang-related crimes were annually reducing. In particular, gang robbery with firearms and gang robbery without firearms have shown an annual decline in reported cases since 2010 ([Malaysian Administrative Modernization and Management Planning Unit, 2017](#)).

This shows that there is a clear difference in perspective regarding actual crime apprehension and prevention between law enforcers and ex-gangsters. Despite clear evidence, the public still views that gangsterism is getting more serious and even the ex-gangsters themselves were of the opinion that the problem of gangsterism is worsening. To an extent, the public view has shaped the perception that not enough is being done to address public safety.

Conclusion

In this study, the psychological and criminogenic themes underlying gangsterism were explored. The explorations of themes were from interviews of police personnel with experience in handling gang-related crime and criminals, and from the experience of ex-gangsters. Three sub-themes each were generated for each main theme.

The psychological factors that were identified from the study are negative emotional responses, low self-control, and high impulsivity, and aggression. Criminogenic factors that were determined are substance abuse, dysfunctional families, and antisocial peers. A newly emerged theme was derived from the raw transcripts, that being monetary gain.

The exploration of these themes are valuable in several ways. Findings herein may create a better and reality-based understanding of profiles of Indian gangsters. The identified factors from this study can help society to realize the reasons behind the occurrence of gangsterism among the Indian community. This can be used to develop a better and suitable mentoring strategy, family therapy, group therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, school-based anti-gang curriculum, and gang awareness education modules.

More research needs to be conducted in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the psychological and criminogenic factors that underlie gang membership. For one, a larger sample population may yield more concrete findings. Secondly, there is a need to explore other factors beyond what was generated in this qualitative study, for example, predispositions and traits that are pro-gangsterism, and social relationships or environments and rewarding mechanisms that sustain gangster cultures in neighborhoods or hotspots.

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Competing Interests

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