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Encounters with Outsiders: An Examination of White Habitus in a Gang Intervention Site

by

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Abstract

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Although law enforcement agencies have utilized incarceration as a means of incapacitation, mass incarceration has not made great strides in impeding gang entry. In response, religious and nonprofit organizations have created community programs to gang intervention and prevention. Few studies have examined the various ways volunteers implement such interventions to a contemporary social problem. Drawing on two years of ethnographic research (2012-2014) as well as 27 semi-structured interviews, this thesis examines how affluent, white mainline Protestant volunteers construct and participate in gang intervention work. I argue that the gang intervention volunteers possess a “white habitus” which inhibits their encounters with gang-affiliated youth. This white habitus, described as predispositions which condition whites’ racial tastes and views on racial matters, informs their perceptions about gang culture in a way that either reproduces whiteness or leads to an unsuccessful relationship between mentor and mentee. Instead, volunteers create “reaffirmed outsiders”, as they reapply stereotypes and generalizations and offer limited perspective on gang intervention solutions. These results provide a more nuanced account of gang intervention implementation and just as importantly, of race and its pernicious effects on the everyday efforts of well-intentioned people and programs.

KEYWORDS: GANG INTERVENTION, RACE, WHITE HABITUS
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Third, to all those who let me invade the gang intervention center. Thanks for giving this little Latina from the streets of Los Angeles a chance. I offered my most genuine self, and in return, I made wonderful friendships.

Last, many thanks to my family. Papa, this work was done for you. You sacrificed your life for my brothers and I, and I can only that my diligence and perseverance can one day resemble yours. You always said to trust that everything will turn out fine – thank you for your calm spirit. Mama, you are my superwoman. Thank you for cheering me on, always. And my brothers and cousins, you push me to be the best that I can be – thanks for being my inspiration.
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1. Table 1. Description of Gang Intervention Volunteers
I. Introduction

Thomas, a 78-year old building developer and master’s in business graduate, considered his life very blessed. Before volunteering at the gang intervention center, he recently had retired from his self-employed business and purchased a luxury car. With a few months of mentoring experience completed, he emphasized that his main goal was to “educate these people.” Through the purchase of magazine subscriptions (i.e. *Smithsonian*) and some tough love conversations, Thomas believed that “it’s okay to be black…but if you are going to succeed and be a part of the world, you got to mold yourself into the mainstream.”

Describing his mentee as a seventeen year old who had been locked up in one form or another since the age of fifteen, Thomas feared this youngster was a lost cause. Although Thomas encouraged the youth to finish up his GED (general education development) certification while in prison and eventually enter community college upon release, Thomas voiced frustration as to whether he could trust his mentee. Thomas had accepted that he was not going to hear the young man’s deepest secrets, but at the same time, he felt lied to multiple times. Therefore, Thomas assumed that the youth would return to gang and criminal activity. Summing up his last few months of mentoring, Thomas found it difficult to relate as well as understand the gang-affected youth: “I’m just an old white man, what do I know.”

Ironically, Thomas’ assertion of his own white identity is not far from sociological consideration. Bonilla-Silva, Goar, and Embrick (2006) argue that besides discussion of whites’ racial attitudes, little research has been conducted on race matters pertaining to whites. In recent years, however, scholars argue that whiteness is a social
identity that determines behavior and defines individuals (Doane 1997; Mills 2003; Myers 2003). In the dichotomy of in-group and out-group, Goar and Sell (2005) confirm that racial identity is utilized as a mechanism of categorization. Common social identities are utilized to form alliances while those outside such alliances are constructed as outsiders (Brewer 1999).

Although past research documents various interventionist models to gang intervention, sparse work has focused on a vital, essential component: the mentors. In a review of the literature, street worker models and prison ministry efforts are most common in the discussion. Lopez-Aguado (2013), in his work on the street worker model (cf. Chicago Area Project), depicted how former Chicano gang members exercised their ‘street liminality’, described as street workers navigating two social realms, as they made resources accessible to barrio youth and helped them navigate criminalizing institutions (i.e. law enforcement). Other scholars agree that sharing a similar cultural history and identity is an important feature of gang intervention (Hayden 2004; Rodriguez 2001). But program evaluators (Klein and Maxson 2006; Oehme III 1997) deem street worker models as unsuccessful, citing increases in violence (Wilson and Chermak 2011) and faulting interventionists as enabling street culture. Beyond that of the street worker model, the closest approximation to examination of gang intervention efforts that did not involve street worker model typologies is prison ministry efforts. Kerley and colleagues (2010) examined the motivations behind evangelical white Protestants participation in prison ministry. Prison ministry workers were described as pulling on compassionate narratives, retelling stories of how prison ministry work was a “calling” and connected to messages in scripture. Tewksbury and Collins (2005) also found that volunteers who
worked in prison ministries were likely to stay longer than in other social service ministries as a result of the high level satisfaction the respondents received in their volunteer work.

Without understanding the mentor role, we cannot answer larger questions about gang intervention—how it works, why it does or does not work, and what it tells us about theory. To focus research on mentors, I examine a mentor-based gang intervention model: positive peer culture. The positive peer culture model is designed to provide role models who can improve social competence and cultivate strengths in at-risk youth. In this thesis, I analyze affluent, white mainline Protestant volunteers’ explanations as to why they take up this social service and how they understand the larger gang problem. The data presented here are drawn from two years (2012-2014) of ethnographic research as well as 27 semi-structured interviews with volunteers of a gang intervention program in Houston, Texas. Using these data, I argue that the gang intervention volunteers possess a “white habitus” which inhibits their encounters with gang-affiliated youth. This white habitus (Bonilla-Silva 2010), described as predispositions which condition whites’ racial tastes and views on racial matters, informs their perceptions about gang culture and activity, in turn, hindering mentoring relationships from evolving between mentor and mentee. The majority of gang intervention volunteers were not capable of bridging social capital or breaking past the thin relationships that they had developed with gang-affiliated youth. Instead, volunteers created “reaffirmed outsiders.”

Matsueda (1992) argues that informal delinquency labelling affects how criminalized youth understand themselves to be perceived by parents. Rios (2011) expands this notion by arguing that various social groups (i.e. parents, law enforcement,
teachers, community centers) impose punitive social control onto criminalized youth causing a labeling hype which reinforces youth to believe that they are in fact criminal. I contribute to this line of thinking by examining a specific group who creates “reaffirmed outsiders” – a process of reappropriating and/or relabeling the criminogenic identity onto already labeled “troubled” youth. The criminalization of people of color (Alexander 2010; Mauer and Chesney-Lind 2002) therefore, I argue, is not static but a reoccurring process of othering who is thought to be criminal by others.

II. Literature Review

*Perception of Gangs*

Gang violence, over the last thirty years, has morphed into an enduring subject of concern (Best 1999). This public perception of gangs has reached governmental platforms as the gang enterprise is now considered an internal form of United States terrorism. “[Gangs] poison our streets with drugs, violence, and all manners of crime,” reads the welcome page of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) “Gangs” website. “We’re redoubling our efforts to disrupt and dismantle gangs” (FBI 2013). According to the 2011 National Gang Threat Assessment Report, 33,000 violent street, motorcycle, and prison gangs exist in the United States. With an estimated 1.4 million members, gangs in the United States are said to be responsible for roughly 48 to 90 percent of crime in various jurisdictions (National Gang Threat Assessment 2011). Gang-related crimes include, but are not limited to: drug distribution, murder, rape, prostitution, immigration offenses, kidnapping, and home invasions. While gang research was historically thought of as a US social problem, it is now depicted in the literature and media as a global problem (Brenneman 2011; Hagedorn 2007).
John J. Dilulio, political scientist at the University of Pennsylvania, described gang members as “superpredators” depicting the rise of “deviant, delinquent, and criminal adults” spawned from the very recesses of “abusive, violence-ridden, fatherless, Godless, and jobless settings” (Dilulio 1995:23). The concept of “superpredator” imprinted on the larger mainstream American audience the cultural imaginary about a specific group of people, those who made up oppositional culture: the gang-affiliated youth subculture. Since its inception of the “rise of the superpredator”, the mainstream understanding of gangs today continues to be “irreparable criminals”, described as individuals deemed to lives of violent and unlawful activity (Rios 2011). Various empirical articles explore this dynamic, in which gang members are stigmatized and negatively labeled (Alonso 2004; Brunson and Miller 2006; Rios 2011).

The United States is no exception. Beyond the development of the “super-predator”, the mainstream audience continues to pigeonhole gangs as permanent criminals, shaping and distilling the true character and nature of the gang subculture—morphing a seemingly marginalized community into something abhorrent and dangerous. This in effect has caused serious security measures within schools reminiscent of Foucault’s (1975) social theory of “panopticonism”, the constant surveillance of persons which ensures functioning of power. Thompkins (2000), for instance, describes how superintendents supported security implementation that made their schools look more like prisons. Examining data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics and the National Center for Education Statistics of 1998, Thompkins (1998) found that people were reacting more out of fear of cultural stereotypes of gangs than actual levels of gang activity present. This is connected to the empirical work of Swetnam and Pope (2001), sparking interest in how
much perceptions differ across social groups about gang realities. In other words, who of
the group carries the most knowledge about gangs, and what can be done to alleviate the
greatest woes of school safety and security in the United States. Teachers for example,
carry a lot of weight within the school structure in terms of interaction with students, but
many teachers hold negative and fearful opinions about gang-affiliated youth (Craig,
Vitaro, Gagnon, and Tremblay 2004).

In 1997, President Bill Clinton declared a “War on Gangs” (Clinton 1997),
resulting in legislation that implemented tougher penalties towards juvenile crime as well
as affecting the nation’s citizens about gang perception. On the federal level, laws such as
the “Gangbusters Bill” of 2005 authorized increased federal monies used towards law
enforcement efforts against gang violence. And national agencies, such as the Federal
Bureau of Investigation, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives, and
the Immigration and Customs Enforcement have each created their own programs to
target gang-related activities. As national and state level groups mobilized to tackle the
gang problem, its effects on the larger public are not congenial either. Fear of gangs has
risen in depth and urgency, scholars say (Best 1999; Lane and Meeker 2005; Sampson et
al. 1997). The culture of fear also promulgated the acceptance of certain ideologies about
certain races and ethnic groups, too.

Conklin (1975) argues that individuals predominantly react to their perceptions of
social problems, instead of understanding the problems themselves. A certain cultural
context, based on news and television media, has given rise to fallacious perceptions
about the gang subculture (Best 1999; Fox and Lane 2010). This cultural context takes
life through language (Bonilla-Silva 2012) and ideas (Lane 2005; McCorkle and Miethe
The gang subculture therefore, has been racialized and hypercriminalized (Anderson 1999; Jankowski 1991; Rios 2011; Vigil 1988). Rios (2011) describes the ubiquitous system of punitive policies youth of color encounter in their schools and communities, constantly stigmatizing and policing those with or without criminal records. Young (2006:54), borrowing a concept from Reiman (2010), describes the *carnival mirror*: “the criminal justice system mirrors what the media presents as the real dangers in society”. Therefore the image of crime, the “real danger” on the streets, heavily depicts the “criminalblackman” (Young 2006). Because of this mythologizing of who and what is criminal, gangs too, become labeled as a poor minority phenomenon. Their marginality becomes a standard marker of who they are, and because of such, the wider public distances themselves. Like the treatment of the “criminalblackman”, there is almost a certain amount of expectation derived from poor minorities to be involved in gangs, and as well, the wider public becomes indifferent to the struggles of marginalized persons poor minority, resulting in cumulative disadvantage for communities of color.

In a recent publication, Pyrooz (2014) examined the effects of adolescent gang membership on educational attainment. Pyrooz (2014) found that only 50 percent of gang-joining youth actually graduate high school while the remainder drop out or fulfill their G.E.D. (General Education Development) requirements in prison (Pyrooz 2014). The cumulative effects of gang joining harm any chance of advanced education, as the author described that only 5 percent of gang-affected youth obtained a four year degree (Pyrooz 2014). Because the accessibility of blue-collar jobs without formal schooling (i.e. high school diploma, some college) no longer exists, the failure of school results in poor life chances, ultimately deciding socioeconomic status, health care, and housing location
(i.e. disadvantaged neighborhood) (Siennick and Staff 2008; Sweeten 2006). Gang members not only become isolated from social convention, but even on the flip side of things, should they precede to gang exit, are given scarce time, space, and opportunity to catch up.

**Current Gang Intervention Approaches**

To combat this emerging underclass, researchers have offered multiple gang intervention approaches (cf. for a review see Klein and Maxson 2006). On one side of the spectrum, government agencies and law enforcement have subjected gang members to deterrence and incarceration approaches (Stinchcomb 2002). These approaches have ebbed and flowed in practice, however. Reactive policing and incarceration is labeled as social control by many criminologists (Jackson 1989; Matthews and Young 1986; Wacquant 2001). It attempts to protect the community by placing all gang members under lock and key rather than addressing individual change. Klein and Maxson (2006) highlight that law enforcement deems the recording of gang crimes based on a limited range of offenses that are stereotypically considered ganglike. These highly police-driven projects, such as “Operation Hammer” and “Operation Hardcore”, worked towards gang suppression through relaying a deterrence message to active gang members. Independent evaluation of these antigang reduction and injunction programs is slim, with criminologists critical of political motivations and implementation (Maxson, Henningan and Sloan 2005; Papachristos 2011).

Closely related, scholars have also studied the process of reintegration and gang exit. Scott (2004), through ethnographic fieldwork, studied how ex-convicts in Chicago attempted to live life post-incarceration. In his study, he found ex-convicts grew
frustrated with the sparse resources available and eventually returned to the gang lifestyle. Travis (2001) articulates that the release of ex-convicts results into the “revolving door” cycle of arrest-incarceration-release-rearrest due to their return into communities already stricken with social and economic disadvantages. These individuals were in need of a space to reintegrate, but found little to rely on.

The few spaces that do open their doors for rehabilitation are religious organizations and lesser non-profit organizations. Respondents at Victory Outreach explained to Flores (2009:1012) how the cultural style of the church, “an intense, spiritual relationship with God, cloaked in an urban, masculine, barrio style, replaced the sense of belonging members once experienced with gangs.” Former gang members were able to reintegrate into mainstream society by reforming their sense of barrio masculinity. Wolseth (2011) also documented how former gang members exchanged one identity for another in the guise of religious conversion. Churches provided guidance and stability for young men wanting out of the streets. Lopez-Aguado (2013) argues that by expecting gang intervention programs to eradicate street identities, they are missing out on the importance of street culture in gang intervention. Trailing the Latino barrios of the San Fernando Valley, Lopez-Aguado (2013) studied how gang intervention programs utilized former gang-affiliated individuals to mentor active gang members. He found that gang interventionists possessed a “street liminality” allowing them to navigate both the margins as well as conventional society. Interventionists had the opportunity to bridge two worlds and be a middle ground to assist gang youth off the streets.

However, these particular street worker interventionist models have received critique from program evaluators, arguing that acknowledging street culture only
amplifies delinquent behavior (Wilson and Chermak 2011). Klein (1995) claims that these forms of outreach efforts are not effective because they legitimize street culture and reinforce gang cohesion. In sum, mass incarceration and incapacitation has been scrutinized as racialized (Alexander 2010) and ineffective (Wacquant 2001), but street worker models are also considered gang enablers by critics (Boyle 2010; Klein and Maxson 2005). But this criticism only takes into account governmental tactics and a specific gang intervention model, street worker model. What about other gang intervention models, and more importantly, what about the individuals who create and conduct gang intervention work – what can we learn about these individuals to have a fuller understanding of gang intervention?

In this thesis, I explore a different gang intervention model, peer positive culture, as a means of exploring the mentors’ participation in gang intervention work. Past research on positive peer culture derives from psychological studies (Lauresen 2010; Vorrath 2013). Results were inconclusive as to whether youth developed forms of moral judgment and social skills with the aid of their peers and/or adult role models (Laursen 2010). I argue that most gang intervention volunteers had serial mentor-mentee relationships that did not last any longer than five months. When asked why, interview participants had no response. Unpacking respondents’ knowledge about gang entry and activity however, they continued to uphold popular cultural renditions of gang life. Even after having met the gang-affected youth, relationships and knowledge about the other was fleeting and limited, only persisting this continuous process, which I term the relabeling of “reaffirmed outsiders.”

Theoretical Framework
The concept of habitus (Bourdieu 1984) provides insight into the nature of othering. The habitus is defined as a “matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions,” which cause people to view the world in a particular lens (Bourdieu 1984:83). Bourdieu recognized that individuals possess agency in formulating unique ideas and experiences, however, their actions were predicated on the social positions they shared in common with others that shared similar beliefs and interests. The habitus therefore orients action, and more importantly, legitimizes forms of boundary-making.

Bonilla-Silva (2010) applies the concept of habitus to “whiteness” in his creation of the “white habitus.” Bonilla-Silva describes the “white habitus” as a “racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates whites’ racial taste, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their views on racial matters” (2010:104). In his article, Bonilla-Silva et al. (2006) examined how whites’ segregated lifestyles lead them to develop negative views about racial others. The white habitus in fact, geographically and psychologically limited whites’ chances of developing meaningful relationships with blacks and other communities of color (Bonilla-Silva et al. 2006). In the same way, I argue that the white habitus, which included their perceptions and views on gangs, directed the volunteers, providing them with preconceived notions and assumptions about the gang-affected population they were working with. As articulated by Bonilla-Silva et al. (2006:233): “This socialization guides whites’ identity and sense of group membership through overt (e.g., parental and teachers’ guidance) as well as subtle mechanisms (e.g., messages conveyed on TV, etc.).” At the same time, this “white habitus” is also a barrier composed of perceptions and feelings, which reproduce
mythologizing about gang-affiliated youth, thereby leading gang intervention volunteers to label them as “reaffirmed outsiders.”

**Gaps in Previous Research**

Previous research has shown that gang violence is a serious issue (Anderson 1999; Melde et al. 2011; Venkatesh 2006), regardless of perceptual and factual differences in gang-related evidence. Examination of the role that gang intervention programs serve to gang-affiliated youth through a qualitative lens is severely limited, however. Quantitative studies and reports consistently document national-level statistics (Egley and Howell 2012; Howell and Moore 2010) on gang violence and gang reduction via incarceration rates, but how are gang intervention sites and programs, on-the-ground, participating in this process?

The theoretical objectives of this study therefore are to expand the already examined gang intervention models and link this research to theory: the influence of dominant racial bias, “the white habitus.” Bruner (1957) claimed that perception is something “beyond the information given.” Certain types of people, groups, or even the world can be built around errors and biases (Jussim 1991). Merton frames it as follows: “Dominated by the customs of our group, we maintain received opinions, distort our perceptions to have them accord with these opinions, and are thus held in ignorance and led into error which we parochially mistake for the truth” (Merton 1972:30). The volunteers at the gang intervention site also held misinterpretations of what to believe about the gang world. This thesis implores more effectively designed gang intervention programming in the United States.

**III. Methods**
The Context

This paper draws on research completed in Houston, TX. Houston is a good location to study gang intervention efforts because the recent emerging gang culture that has caught local agencies as well as the media attention. In 2010, Houston Police documented 10,000 gang members in Houston (Schiller 2010). Within three years, Houston, most currently, is marked as having about 21,000 of the 100,000 gang members in Texas (Glenn 2014). The Texas Department of Public Safety released its recent report in April of 2014, “The Texas Gang Threat Assessment,” a broad overview on gang activity in the state of Texas (http://www.dps.texas.gov), illustrating how rival criminal organizations are joining for lucrative, financial prospects. Determining whether this journalistic claim carries validity would require an additional article or text on the topic (cf. for further discussion on “underground economies” see Jankowski 1991; Venkatesh 2006), the more than 200 street gangs identified in the Houston area raise youth delinquency and school safety concerns. Described as having younger, more violent membership (Schiller 2010), gangs continue to be equated to the superpredator epidemic of the 1990s.

The vast majority of gang-related homicides nationally occur in highly populated areas (Egley and Howell 2010). Houston—the fourth largest city in the country (US Census 2012)—is no stranger to gang violence. While we do not have robust statistics on gang activity in Houston, local newspapers consistently provide account of the gang violence parading the city. A 2012 headline in The Houston Chronicle reads “Gangs on rise, but idea to fight them raises eyebrows” cautioning its readers of the gang membership increase to 20,000 members, a twenty nine percent increase since 2010,
according to the writer. The article continues to describe a suggestion by retired police Chief Brad Bradford to reduce the number of police cadets and use those funds to create more prevention and intervention programs.

**Setting**

From August 2012 to May 2014, I spent over 150 hours\(^4\) volunteering at a gang intervention center in an impoverished neighborhood of Houston. The gang intervention center is a non-profit that began in the spring of 2012. This non-profit is a partnership with two affluent churches working closely with one another to provide this service, along with cooperation with the local juvenile probation department. Gang affected youth were enrolled into the program through the aid of law enforcement and parole officers as an alternative\(^5\) to fulfilling probation. Youth varied in the amount of participation time, having a choice between required and optional events throughout the week. Based on a private interview with the director however, many of the youth continue to keep coming after meeting court orders, even bringing siblings and friends to the program. Youth are of Hispanic and Black descent, ranging in age from twelve to eighteen. Gang intervention curriculum include life skills courses, one-on-one mentoring, probation officer visits, as well as, positive social outings (i.e. soccer games, laser tag). Religious proselytizing efforts were a rarity, and not directly part of programming, only occurring if the volunteer was compelled to do so.

I made my commute from my university to the gang intervention center 2-3 times a week, visiting on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday afternoons to the early evening. On monthly occasion, I attended retreats and workshops with the gang intervention director and the staff of volunteers. Tuesday nights were baseball practice. Young men, dressed in
cargo shorts, long socks, and white t-shirts, ran practice in the early evening with the aid of the bright field lights. I stood on the sidelines with staff, cheering words of encouragement or shouting wisecracks. Two men, in their mid-fifties, retired coaches of minor league teams, instructed the boys as to what play or routine was next. Practices would run for about two hours until we all got hungry. These nights would conclude at a local burger joint where the boys poked fun at one another and scarfed down their meals. Thursday evenings were not as exclusive as these were social nights with another at-risk youth program. This at-risk youth program, founded on the rules of dance, entertained breakdancing and locking battles all evening. Pick-up basketball as well as video game stations were also made available. Gang intervention center volunteers typically were behind the scenes, prepping pasta and salad. In 2014, I became an active mentor utilizing this time to meet with my client, reviewing college admission and housing applications, as well as, offer mentoring. On any given Saturday, I was attending social events with gang intervention youth and staff. I found Saturday afternoons, whether riding bikes on the seawall or playing arcade games, as opportunities to make casual but informative conversation about the local street scene. Volunteers however were not present for these escapades, which included trips to restaurants and entertainment businesses.

Initially, I entered the site with the intent of examining gang intervention processes. Given that these young men are in the middle of role exit—becoming an ex-gang member (Brenneman 2011; Ebaugh 1988; Flores 2013), I wanted to explore the “positive peer culture” model and evaluate how these young men make the transition from gang member to positive peer. I realized that I could not immediately find answers to that research question because the gang intervention center was only a year old.
Because I was originally preoccupied with finding transformations among the gang-affiliated youth, for some time I failed to see the vital other side of the equation: gang intervention volunteers. This project, therefore, came to be shaped to understand the baseball coaches, food preparers, and mentors explanations of participation as well as extrapolate their knowledge and perceptions of gang activity in Houston.

In-depth interview data were collected from 30 individuals (3 of the respondents were not racially categorized as White so they were excluded from analysis), who volunteer at a gang intervention center in the neighborhood I called Allentown. All respondents were actively involved with the gang intervention center in various capacities: mentoring, sports coaching, and hosting. I identified volunteers appropriate for interviewing through the gang intervention center director and his staff. Volunteers were appropriate for interviews if they were involved in either three capacities mentioned above. An e-mail was sent to all volunteers (N=39) about the research project and interview participation. Potential respondents contacted me via e-mail to schedule a date, time, and location. Interviews were typically conducted in a neutral space, the local café down the street from my university, for example. Interviews were also conducted in the respondent’s work occupation as a chance to enlighten me about their lifestyle beyond their service work at the gang intervention center. Each interview was audio recorded and lasted between 45 and 80 minutes. Because the purpose of the project was to collect a wide range of narratives of those involved in gang intervention, I attempted to include volunteers of different races, gender, age group, religious identification, and occupation status. I quickly discovered that the majority of volunteers were male, white, mid-forties
and fifties, mainline Protestant affiliated, and held successful business occupations. See Table 1.

Table 1. Description of Gang Intervention Volunteers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Faith Tradition</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Episcopalian</td>
<td>Finance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colt</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>Gas Geologist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>Sales and Finance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Episcopalian</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Episcopalian</td>
<td>Accountant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Episcopalian</td>
<td>Claims Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Just Christian</td>
<td>Landscape Architect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matteo</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>Mechanical Engineer</td>
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<td>Jane</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>Seminarian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bryan</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Episcopalian</td>
<td>Finance</td>
</tr>
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<td>Thomas</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Episcopalian</td>
<td>Building Developer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>Antique Shop Owner</td>
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<td>M</td>
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<td>Valve Business, Sales</td>
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<td>Henry</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>Just Christian</td>
<td>Banker</td>
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<td>M</td>
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<td>Trader</td>
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As mentioned, volunteers were involved in three specific capacities: mentoring, sports coaching, and hosting. Volunteers who were involved with hosting were typically
less engaged with the gang-affiliated youth. For volunteers who took up hosting, tasks included setting up the furniture and collating paperwork for probation officer visits at the gang intervention center facility. At other times, hosting involved volunteers preparing and serving hot meals to youth. As far as sports coaching, volunteers with sports background assisted in coaching the gang-affiliated youth in baseball. On Tuesday nights, two specific volunteers brought bats and glove mitts and taught the ins and outs of baseball. The last form of volunteering was mentoring. Access to this form of volunteer work was difficult due to Institutional Review Board limitations and not wanting to interfere with important mentorship time (i.e. mentors only received one hour a week to visit their incarcerated mentees). This compelled me to go beyond ethnographic research and conduct interviews in an effort to understand the “mentor” relationships the volunteers had with the young who frequent the center from the perspective of the mentors themselves. Mentoring involved the volunteers going into the juvenile detention centers as well as the local jails weekly for one-hour visits with gang-affiliated youth. The majority of volunteers described having several mentees, therefore, they recounted their visits and described each one of their mentees and what was gained in each experience. Some volunteers were assigned “certified” juveniles and discussed the heavier realities of visiting adult prisons that housed juveniles.

Analytical Strategy

When conducting a qualitative study it is important to interview enough individuals until “theoretical saturation.” “Theoretical saturation” is the point in time in which the researcher does not find novel additional data in the data collection process. The interview responses thereby become similar instances over and over again (Glaser
and Strauss 1967). For data analysis, I followed a process of moving back and forth from data and analysis to identify key thematic categories (Charmaz 2000). I noticed a couple of recurring themes in my data and would keep those categories in mind when I returned to the field. I wanted to be confident that the data I was collecting was truly taking place in the site. Ethnography also gave me the chance to compare interview accounts to action itself (Whyte 1943). Although gang intervention volunteers described their mentor-mentee relationships during our one-on-one interviews, I was able to compare their responses with their behavior in the field setting. This volunteer work was raw and real in the sense that volunteers could not exaggerate or embellish their duties and interactions as I was with them during their volunteer hours. With each visit, I was able to pick up the emotion and cooperation between both groups.

During each of my fieldwork visits, I was committed to fully involving myself in the event. This meant that no form of note-taking was done on site. A past study within a gang intervention sites (Lopez-Aguado 2013) supports this method of observation (where the researcher does not take notes) due to the sensitive nature of intervention work and building of relationships between mentor-mentee. Instead, after each event, I would drive home and sit in my residential parking lot outside my condominium jotting down key notes into my steno notebook. Thereafter, I would thoroughly unpack those notes on hundreds of electronic Word document pages. I did not rely on any electronic qualitative software beyond Microsoft Excel to organize the data. With Microsoft Excel, each of my notes jotted onto the interview guide were divided into sections and documented into short, pithy phrases. This technique was helpful once all interviews were transcribed so as to use Excel as a “search engine” to find data suitable in developing my argument.
Examples of codes created, included: community need, serial relations, individualized problems and solutions, racialized differences, and outsider reaffirmations. These codes were later operationalized to fit into the theoretical application of “white habitus” in that codes such as community need, individualized problems and solutions, were respondents’ ways of framing the gang problem. As far as outsider reaffirmations, subcategories were created to demonstrate the various ways the process of relabeling gang-affected youth as criminal (i.e. “othering”, “labeling mentee ruffian/gangbanger”, “blaming mentee for delinquency”).

IV. Findings

To describe the process of gang intervention implementation and functioning, I begin first by describing how the gang intervention center was first formed, highlighting how volunteers viewed the community of Allentown as in dire need. Their impressions of the neighborhood, dilapidation and poverty, struck a chord that something had to be done about the gang violence. Thereafter, I discuss the mentors’ explanations for participating in gang intervention work. Attributed as a “culture of encounter”, I highlight how mentors understood this type of social service effort as an attempt to bridge social capital (i.e. social skills, cultivate strengths) and “encounter” the other. As I move into the third and final section of my findings, however, I demonstrate that the majority of mentors had fleeting and serial relationships with their mentees. I apply Bonilla-Silva’s (2010) “white habitus” to argue that the mentors, steeped in their white habitus, go about their volunteering in a way that either reproduced whiteness or led to a complete failure of the relationship and thus of progress in helping gang youth move forward. Instead, mentors
created “reaffirmed outsiders” as they reappropriated and/or relabeled gang-affected youth as other.

The Gang Problem as a Community Problem

This section introduces us to the community of Allentown through the use of factual statistics as well as respondents’ views of the neighborhood. In the respondents’ descriptions of the neighborhood they describe the origins of the gang intervention center. The ambition to work with gang-affiliated youth is not an easy task. Still, the impetus behind forming the gang intervention center was its persistent need. Daniel, a figurehead of Thursday night social events, narrated the gang intervention center origin story:

The lead pastor [at Allentown church], he and a small group begin to discern what relevant ministry really was needed in that area. They went and talked to people. They talked to business folk, they talked to store owners, they talked to school folks, and other people who were identified as civic leaders. And one of the reoccurring things that kept coming back [to] was there all these gang-involved kids who are making trouble, getting in trouble, or being victims. And that theme kept coming back. They kept trying to move away from that but it kept coming back up. It was the need.

The community of Allentown consistently catches local Houston television news only if it relates to criminal activity or gang-related violence. Headlines read: Teens shot outside high schools and night clubs, troubled apartments synonymous with gangs and crime. Bryan, a 27-year old lucrative oil and gas financer, claimed Allentown as the “rough side of town” and the “one [he] only knew about through bad newspaper stories.” Although an up and coming landmark back in the 1960’s, this massive housing development of Allentown devolved into unemployment, foreclosure, white flight, and residential housing decay. After Houston’s economy collapse of 1986, rent landlords had no other choice but to rent to anyone at extremely low prices. By the end of the 1980s,
these apartments became known as the “Allentown Ghetto” and home to the Southwest Cholos street gang (“SWC”).

The drive towards Allentown is distinct. Steering down the main road, I pass by two-story homes and prim lawns. The only thing keeping me company down this long road are all the BMW and other high-end car brands parked outside these attractive homes. I would know that I reached Allentown though when I caught sight of the small businesses’ store signs in various languages: Spanish, Vietnamese, English, and Chinese. Low income services such as Metro PCS cellphone providers as well as “3 Shoes for $25” stores emblazoned the streets with their neon colored flashing lights. In recent years, businesses and department stores moved out of the city, while the neighborhood’s once-upon-a-time centerpiece, the Allentown Mall, continues to fight bankruptcy and dwindling sales profit. Compared to the posh suburbia in the rearview, Allentown was gritty metropolitan. Tired Latina women stood at the bus stop under the sweltering sun waiting in anticipation of air-conditioned transportation, while a group of African American adolescents could be seen in the middle of the road, attempting to jay walk to the local grocery store chain. Most recent U.S. Census data reports that Hispanics make up roughly half the Allentown population, with a foreign-born population ranging between 36-70% within various Census tracks. The other racial/ethnic groups included in this neighborhood are African-American, Chinese, and Vietnamese. Heading deeper into the neighborhood, the low-income apartments are a constant reality. After Hurricane Katrina, Allentown received the largest concentration of evacuees (roughly 6,000 people in more than 2,600 apartment units within one zip code). The neighborhood also dabbles
below the poverty line as average household incomes range between $22,000-39,000 (U.S. Census 2012).

From the gang intervention center committee perspective, the state of Allentown was indicative of unsettling the symbiotic nature of society. The dilapidation, impoverishment, and transience were conducive to delinquency and gang entry. Bill, a 76-year old who owned his own financial services firm, explained:

Here are these kids down in [Allentown] in these dense apartment demographics. There’s no grass. There’s no ball fields. There’s no sports team. And here’s kids in the fifth grade starting to dress in gang wear sort to speak.

Allentown in other words, was not providing the basic resources to keep the community afloat.

Future generations of Allentown children did not have alternative programs or afterschool activities to keep them off the streets. These particular neighborhood characteristics instead were conducive to delinquency and gang entry. But it planted the seed.

What unfolded within the gang intervention center committee, therefore, was the hiring of advisors and overseers. The ringleader of the budding gang intervention center was someone of expertise. Mark, eventually bubbling up as the authority, had various relationships and connections in the city of Houston. With a successful at-risk youth program already under his belt, Mark and his steering committee recognized that this “community need” was beyond church ministry standards. Instead, the gang intervention center grew quickly into a non-profit, but as well, a “bizarre animal” as its partners
included both church institutions (Methodist and Episcopalian churches) as well as the county’s local juvenile justice system. This unusual partnership was designed to fulfill the mission of the gang intervention center: “to get kids connected to communities.”

Developing a Culture of Encounter

In this section, I retell the narratives that respondents articulated in explaining why they chose to take up this social service effort. More importantly, I describe the ways in which volunteers attempted to connect with the “other”.

In a circle of chairs, the gang intervention center volunteers sat together listening to the Episcopalian pastor conclude his sermon on “children as emissaries”. He expressed how children are meant to be representatives of God and teach us meaningful lessons about humility, grace, and Christian living. It was the pastor’s way of staging the topic of discussion: why volunteer in gang intervention efforts? As he opened the circle for discussion, one-by-one the volunteer staff revealed their desire for working with gang-affiliated youth. Responses such as “service to God” and “this work is beyond my Sunday service duties” were verbalized. The majority of the individuals acknowledged that God had something to do with their volunteer work. Religious purpose weighed heavy in the room – “the Holy Spirit [was] nibbling on the back of [their] ears.”

Jane14, at 56 years old, was pursuing her theological seminary degree (travelling on aircraft on a weekly basis to attend her classes in northern Texas) as well as completing two internships at neighboring churches in the community. It was at one of the churches that she was completing her internship where she was introduced to the gang intervention director. During her internship, she spent her time organizing the volunteer
staff, matching them up with mentees as well as coordinating any necessary administrative duties (i.e. background checks). She too framed her decision to participate in the gang intervention effort with religious talk, saying:

They said that the modern day lepers are the kids that are involved in gang activity. And that they are all around us and we don’t even see them. Kind of the way the lepers are back in Jesus day. And that really sat with me for a long time…I think that really resonated with me just because the thought that anyone is that marginalized, especially at that age, is just heartbreaking for me.

For the gang intervention center, volunteers vocalized how the strife that gang-affiliated youth face nowadays resonated with the persons encountered by Jesus Christ. The social gospel meant mobilizing their knowledge on Jesus’ teachings and striving to bring charity; a “light in the darkness.”

Continuing on the theme of marginalization, respondents not only expressed through the recitation of biblical verses the marginalization that gang-affiliated youth faced, but also acknowledged the psychological effects of gang-affiliated youth, as additional reason for their participation in social service efforts. When I asked how she initially became interested in the gang intervention center, Clare explained:

I remember a Powerpoint that [the gang intervention director presented], on a screen which showed, maybe 50 elements, that are sort of together contribute to a kid being in a good place. A kid’s confidence and mental health and relationships and positive things. And I think that what was just so stark was to realize that most of the [gang-affiliated] kids didn’t have any of those things. You know if some of the elements are that they attend a youth group or they are involved in afterschool sports or in family, have a two-parent family, most of these kids are going to come up with 1 or 2 points out of 50. So it was just the so much against them being able to make a positive, be a positive force in the world…I think it was just then realizing that we really needed to be on board somehow making a difference.

Respondents continuously repeated the need to make a difference. It was their mission to help correct the poor judgments and actions made by gang-affiliated youth. Because these
volunteers had various credentials and accomplishments in their own life, it was now
their time to lend a helping hand to the “other”.

But beyond motivation that was informed by religious belief, what did the actual
encounter look like and how did volunteers prepare for their “encounters with outsiders?”
During workshop trainings, new volunteers were required to meet at the gang
intervention center headquarters. The mainstay for the gang intervention center, however,
was in the middle of Allentown. For many of the respondents, this was not familiar
territory. In fact, if volunteers could avoid this area, they did. But now it was different,
for they were merging to encounter the other rather than deflect that reality. Expensive
cars would remain parked outside the shabby parking lot, as volunteers scurried into the
halls of building before nightfall. It was during these workshops where the director not
only presented talks about “0 assets” as mentioned by Clare, but provides a history on
gang origins in Houston. The director, Mark, indicated how unique the gang history of
Houston was compared to Los Angeles or Chicago. For Houston, gangs were relatively
new – something that formed in the 1980s. Daniel\textsuperscript{17}, part of the gang intervention
administrative committee, articulates further about Houston’s “gang problem”
distinction:

Houston is thoroughly unique from LA or Chicago because we don’t have these
generational, super organized kind of gang realities… in Houston the gang piece is
very disorganized, it’s still in its first, just emerging into second generation stuff. It’s also
not super concentrated in one area. It’s very spread around. Which also keeps it very
disorganized. It’s fairly different than the other cities.

Mark was careful to get out the facts about Houston gangs. For many respondents, these
orientation meetings were their first opportunity to hear factual knowledge about gangs in
Houston. Most volunteers admitted that prior to that, all they could rely on was what they heard or saw on the local news. They believed gangs to be connected to “drug cartels” in Latin America, they described gangs as “sophisticated organizations”, and they also subscribed to the idea that gangs were formed as a “means of belonging”. While all three popular assumptions are not entirely false on face value, it was important that Mark inform the volunteers about the various social factors that played a role in gang formation. Mark found it important to break down the personal identity of a gang-affiliated youth. That is, Mark found it resourceful to flesh out the character of the gang member, beyond criminal identity, as a means of doing away the master status label of gang member, but also to pull on the volunteers’ religious cords so as to acknowledge that other was no longer other, but brother.

Still, sitting in these “support group” meetings and orientation workshops surrounded by volunteers, I could not help but notice the blatant contrasts between the two groups. First, with outward appearance: the gang-affiliated youth wore basketball shorts and graphic tees, while the volunteer staff wore business casual clothing. Mannerisms and language use were also different. Gang-affiliated youth would cuss up a storm or use slang to make their point, such as one Thursday night when a few of the guys and I sat on the sidelines of the outdoor basketball court debating the role of smoking marijuana. One young man, in cami print chinos (trousers) and a white t-shirt, rubbing his chinos in anticipation, exclaimed: “look, my nigga, I’ll get real about this shit…” and proceed to offer his explanation. Volunteer staff on the other hand, utilized academic vocabulary to express themselves, recounting various introductions, as they complimented my “successful educational attainment” and how my schooling at said
university was “advantageous.” Likes, dislikes, music interests, hobbies – how did the volunteers make sense of this new journey? For example, Colt\textsuperscript{18} was very forthright in articulating his train of thought when first becoming a mentor:

I tell people, I never in my wildest dreams. Growing up, you know I’m 57 years old now, and growing up and becoming a professional, and having a very, I’ve done okay. And I never thought that I would be going down and hugging a 17 year old gangbanger. If somebody told me that 10 years ago, I’d say “yeah, that ain’t going to happen”…That’s totally out of people’s environment because I was immersed professionally, I was immersed in working side by side with people with college degrees and advanced degrees…to go from that environment, working and talking, and dealing with making multimillionaire decisions of where we are going to drill wells and everything. To go from that to down here talking to this knucklehead…it’s totally, totally, totally polar opposites right there.

Indeed, it was a colliding of two worlds that had never known much of each other prior to these encounters. It was shock, disbelief, and intrigue for volunteers. This was not an environment that they ever had to train or prepare for. Instead, it was their lack of knowledge that seemed to become a barrier or insecurity wedge between them and gang-affiliated youth.

White Habitus and Gang Knowledge

In disentangling what comprises the “white habitus”, we return to Bonilla-Silva’s definition: the “white habitus” is “a “racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates whites’ racial taste, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their views on racial matters” (2010:104). As mentioned in the definition, the “white habitus” is constructed via socializing factors. To begin, respondents mentioned how much their environment was in sharp contrast to the world of gang-affiliated youth. “I don’t work with anybody that’s been to jail. My home, my neighborhood, [I’ve] lived a very
sheltered life,” the 58-year old chemical engineer, Nicholas, frames the background of many respondents. Colt, a 57-year old gas geologist, also explains:

I’m coming out of a professional college educated, going to church, living in the [well-to-do, exclusive neighborhood] area, to where my world is pretty in place, to go from that, to listening all of this stuff. You are just like this is absolutely crazy, it’s just hard to make logic of all of it. But then again, you can kind of see, they are giving things that we are all looking for. It’s just these kids aren’t mature enough or educated enough to know that the other thing that they are also bringing into the equation is detrimental to themselves and detrimental to other people. They don’t, but I guess when you are young, you are invincible and you don’t think about that.

For Colt, the world that is “pretty in place” – go to college, go to church, and reside in the posh areas is the fulfillment of the life well lived. It is his understanding of the social order. In having to hear the stories from his mentees about their “oppositional cultures” on the other hand, the logics behind drug dealing and “hitting licks” (robberies) as a means of making money and providing income appeared farfetched and selfish.

Volunteers understood individualized efforts of success differently, Michael, a 31-year old who made a lucrative career out of sales and finance now having the opportunity to run his own home office business, described the business world as such:

I had a sales job. I was there for a year, and towards the end, I didn’t really like it. It was very boiler room, very ‘what have you done for me lately’. Numbers driven. Quota driven. Being in a suit, knocking, going door to door, asking to talk to the owner of these businesses, and people just didn’t want you in the office. It was brutal. But you learned a lot. Built some character and strength.

These specific conformed identities were thought to be the crème de la crème. Rising from a place of disdain for the law and illegal activity was morally and socially wrong.

As mainline Protestants who actively attended weekly service and participated in prayer groups, respondents struggled with understanding how gang-affected youth could commit criminal acts.
What is more, it was important to gang intervention volunteers that gang-affected youth assimilate into the mainstream. Thomas\textsuperscript{22} equated success with accommodating to the majority, considerably the norm of whiteness:

It’s okay to be black, it’s okay to be white, it’s okay to be Spanish-Hispanic, it’s okay to be Asian, but if you are going to succeed and be a part of the world you got to mold yourself into the mainstream, and he doesn’t know how to do that. If you are going to try to get along, you got to speak the language that is out there. Street talk is not going to get you around.

Their “white habitus” also framed their cultural conceptions of gang criminality. Gangs were understood to be “violent”, “bunch of ruffians”, “bad seeds”. Negative connotations flurried whenever asked to conceptualize gang. In the same way, respondents also had assembled explanations about gang participation. The two popular reasons for joining a gang were family dysfunctionality and glorification. Bill\textsuperscript{23} theorized about family difference within minority families, when saying:

I’ve come to realize that there’s quite some differences in how kids grow up in a black family and how they grow up in a Hispanic family. I think there’s different sense...well, I think that family is much higher on the totem pole in a Hispanic family than it is in the Black family. There’s just so many particular...I don’t know. I looked at a lot of Hispanic families. The greater possibility that there’s a mom and dad, rather than just a mom. I think in the Black community there’s just an absolute absence of fathers. So many of these kids...have had such horrible experiences with their father. Lie about where their dad is when he’s gone off to prison. It’s hard to understand God the father, when their father was no damn good.

The respondent essentialized differences between black and Hispanic families, in asserting that Hispanic families were family oriented, but more importantly, subscribing to the idea of absentee father epidemic only continues to perpetuate a certain image about the black community more generally. And further dissecting the problems within the
family, Michael\textsuperscript{24} too, expanded on the problems of the family unit as reason for gang formation:

I think people join gangs because it fills a void for them. A void that they don’t have at home. I don’t know anybody that has a really good family that joins a gang. And that may be a pot-shot towards parents of gang members, but maybe they need a pot-shot. I don’t know what to say, a spade is a spade. A lot of time it’s the need to feel, to fit in, to have people give them affection and be a part of something.

The paradigm excuse therefore, was that if the traditional family unit failed, gangs would arise from the underclass. Gangs were a viable solution because respondents believed that gangs were “substitute family” which offered kinship that was lacking in the home.

But respondents also bought in a lot of media sensationalism when describing a second possibility of gang membership: glorification. Another suggestion offered by Michael\textsuperscript{25}:

And maybe there are some that have decent families, and someone joins a gang, and maybe they have delusions of grandeur. They’ve seen Scarface a few too many times and they think they are going to go be some rich hustler.

Respondents admitted that their knowledge about gangs was limited and ultimately derived from what they saw on the local news or cinema flick. Gangs again were etched into their perception as something to fear. 56-year old Carol\textsuperscript{26}, who was a frequent hostess during Thursday night events, hinted about her qualms, when recalling her experience at orientation:

…when I went through that orientation, I remember sitting there at [the church]. And I remember [director], someone asked him, where the juvenile gangs were. And he said, oh, imagine this church is Switzerland. You have one that goes that way, and another goes that way. And I remember thinking to myself, ‘okay, and this orientation ends when? And are we going to get out of here before it gets dark?’ And I remember thinking that this was my biggest concern: is it safe? And it sort of like for me, stepping outside the box to come and do this.
For the volunteers, the energy devoted to getting involved in this work required them stepping out of their comfort zones and boundaries. However, while this may have been recognizable behavior on the surface, what lingered beneath, the latent functions, in other words, the unintended consequences emerged, too.

*Reaffirming the Outsider*

In this final section, I develop the concept of “reaffirmed outsiders” – this is the process of volunteers reappropriating and/or relabeling the criminogenic identity onto already labeled “troubled” youth. Through the othering of gang culture and symbols, respondents demonstrated their frustration and disconnect with their mentees.

It became readily apparent that for those volunteers that mentored, many of them would list numerous young men they had previously mentored, giving off a sense of serial relationships. As I dug deeper, asking about the types of relationships these respondents had with their mentees, the same descriptions and activities came up: playing cards, talking about the weather, chatting about sports and current events. It was rare that the volunteers would get any deeper beyond small talk, and even less likely that they garnered any personal information from their mentees. For Colt, he still was trying to wrap his mind around people who were raised in non-privilege and their life outcomes. Almost jokingly, Colt stated:

And if you haven’t been to county lock up, you could do a PhD dissertation on “where have we gone wrong in society?”…There are more subspecies of human life that come, that are down there, and that are coming into that facility for visitation. It is a, I told some of my friends, have you seen the FB posts where shoppers of Wal-Mart…It’s hilarious but sad. And you go down to the jail, it makes, it be like comparing shopping at Wal-Mart to Neiman Marcus, for the experience. You would think going into Wal-Mart, upscale adventure, compared to going down to this jail down there…It’s bizarr-o world when you go down
there. But I guess to some people, it’s a normal life…but for others of us in society, that aren’t in that world, it’s a very abnormal, very abnormal deal there.

This so-called “bizarre-o world” for Colt was his disdain for all things that did not coincide with personal schemas. He talked about one young lady, who was visiting her boyfriend in prison, but was “high off drugs” and had “shaven her hair off like a Mohawk”. These small examples as well as his discussion of his mentee’s “stupid” decisions to commit automobile theft all seemed commonsense that one does not commit these crimes.

Respondents voiced frustration with the gang lifestyle, not thrilled about their “gang terminology” or their “appearance”. Colt described how much it would stereotype his mentee if he chose to continue wearing baggy clothing and “using those words”. Volunteers in working with their mentees did not attempt to bridge the differences they had, but instead attempted to explain to them that their lifestyle was wrong and would not allow for a beneficial life. What I term “reaffirmed outsiders” therefore was the process in which gang intervention volunteers pointed at the gang-affected youth type of dress, language, and mannerisms and looked to it as outside of themselves. If relationships between mentor and mentee did not prosper, it was not a missed opportunity, but more so the fact that gang-affected youth were too far gone in the wrong direction.

Visiting Susan in her upscale, private community, we had a rather haphazard interview as she discussed openly the selling of her antique shop and had to stop the interview for phone calls from furniture movers attempting to deliver a sofa to her vacation home. In the time we got to converse about her several months tutoring one of
the gang-affected youth, she could not recall his name, but did describe him as “very bright”. During the math and biology tutoring sessions, she explained that she kept conversation on “light subjects”, such as the weather or school. Susan complained though that the tutoring space was not a “real controlled situation”, as other youth also occupied the tutoring space, made available by the gang intervention program, and watched YouTube videos or chatted. She felt that the atmosphere was too “hang loosey”, and ultimately, her time with the individual was cut short once he got off probation and stopped showing up to the center. When I pressed Susan about why this tutoring relationship ended as quickly as it started, she could not provide a response. Instead, she was “not regretful of the turn of events”, and believed that if he and other gang-affected youth dressed more appropriately and presented themselves outside of the street mentality, they would have better chances. Even though she understood the gang intervention program as a chance for gang-affected youth to “connect with people who have succeeded in life”, her missed chance to “empower” was not a fault on her behalf, but a problem of street youth.

On one of my down days at the center, I sat with some of the youth and made small conversation while watching others play pick-up basketball. I noticed one of the volunteers approach our table and ask for two of the young men to sit with him at another table. Glancing over and hearing parts of their conversation, I noticed that the youth seemed to be getting scolded and/or lectured by the mentor about responsibility. The mentor was rather annoyed with the situation but preceded to finish discussing paperwork before briskly leaving the center. I looked over to one of the youth and signaled a thumbs up to him. He shook his head and gave me a thumbs down. As the two youth returned to
my table, they explained how they felt scolded as if they were children. I asked what started the whole situation, to which they explained how the mentor was providing them with access to free eyeglasses but he was upset that they had not completed the paperwork.

In that instance, the volunteer was clearly not happy with the lack of effort given by the two youth. The volunteer was attempting to provide them with free eyeglasses but was frustrated that they still had not completed their paperwork. But in such an instance, the youth were uncomfortable with how they were being treated. When I asked one of the youth what had happened, he explained, “some guero just having us fill this paper out for free glasses. But he got all mad for nothing.” While I did not have a chance to speak to the volunteer right after the ordeal, it was apparent from the youth that social distancing had taken place during the event and more so after the event. For one of the youth, the ordeal became an example of the lack of relatability to the volunteers.

“I don’t understand why they are criminally disposed. They can be a gang and just play basketball every afternoon. I don’t get why the criminal aspect is there,” voiced a very confused Nicholas, after discussing the purpose of gangs. He had struggled at framing what type of activities gangs partake in, acknowledging that he was going to list the information he received from what he read (i.e. newspaper). He understood gangs to be a source of familial attachment but “the criminal aspect” was beyond his rational thinking. He paused during our interview, holding his fork still, and gazed into space. His past mentee relationship was described as “disengaged” and “distracted.” He tried his best to start some form of conversation with the young man but felt that his youth was “somewhere else” mentally when they met on a weekly basis. That “criminal aspect”
almost became a wall between him and his youth—it was their inhibitor of long-lasting relationship and open communication.

V. Discussion and Conclusion

Gang intervention scholarship is limiting in terms of theory and evaluation. The literature most recently evaluates governmental takedowns such as the “War on Gangs” and street worker models (Klein and Maxson 2006; Lopez-Aguado 2013). In this review, governmental operations towards gangs are critiqued by criminologists and street worker models are viewed as promoting criminal street identities. This thesis therefore not only evaluates a different gang intervention model, peer positive culture, but also examines a “worlds collide scenario”, in that white mentors interacted and mentored gang-affected, Latino and black youth. In this setting however, program implementation does not always measure up to standards. While the gang intervention program attempted to introduce gang-affected youth to positive peers and build social competence, instead, white mainline Protestant volunteers found themselves inspired by religious rhetoric to take up this work, but steeped in their white habitus, went about their volunteering in a way that reproduced whiteness as well as lead to a complete failure of the relationship and thus of progress in helping the gang-affected youth move forward. As a result, volunteers created “reaffirmed outsiders”, the process of relabeling the criminogenic identity onto already labelled “troubled” youth.

Within the gang intervention volunteers, we see how white habitus shaped their knowledge about gangs. Respondents described the identity and activity of gangs as what is glorified on television and Hollywood film—baggy clothing, drug-dealing, and violence. They understood gangs as a means of belonging and attachment in a
neighborhood struck by poverty and family breakdown. And most importantly, while volunteers’ intentions were meant to cultivate strengths for gang-affected youth, volunteers’ white habitus, predispositions about success, were not communicated well and ultimately, resulting in short-lived relationships with their mentees.

By framing the experiences of volunteers through Bonilla-Silva’s concept of white habitus, we are able to better understand what types of mentoring relationships are created between mentor-mentee and more importantly, what types of mentoring relationships work and do not work in gang intervention. Rios (2011) shows how advice given by probation and police officers had little practical application for criminalized youth on the streets. Similarly, although volunteers attempted to provide their ideas of success onto gang-affected youth (working hard, change street clothing and demeanor), resources were still not put in place to make success in mainstream society more accessible to the other. Instead of youth meeting up with their volunteers to scheduled appointments at McDonalds, as voiced by respondents, they missed meetings, refused visits in jail, and demonstrated to volunteers their lack of consideration and interest in wanting to exit the gang and become contributing members to society. These mentoring relationships transformed into volunteers creating “reaffirmed outsiders” in that they were relabeling and reappropriating the criminogenic identity onto already “troubled” youth. Because of their white habitus, respondents were limited in their knowledge of understanding the larger social injustices and inequalities that contributed to the formation of street lifestyles. Rather, volunteers chalked up their youths’ delinquent behaviors as individualized decisions and situations to commit criminal acts.
The findings of this thesis suggest new forms of implementation in gang intervention and larger discussions of race relations. Gang intervention programs operate as sites that provide alternative spaces for gang members (Flores 2013; Klein and Maxson 2005) who want to exit gangs and reenter conventional society. But such spaces are not beneficial if gang intervention programmers do not recognize the amount of racialized and hypercriminalized labelling gang members are subjected to. Gang intervention programs however are ideal platforms to provide information presentations on racial matters. Given that the volunteers had a vested interest in aiding gang members out of the street lifestyle, gang intervention programmers can utilize such spaces to unveil the white habitus and challenge whiteness wherever it exists (Bonilla-Silva 2010). Positive peer culture strives at creating a staff that shares a commonality of purpose and a climate of change (Vorrath 2013), by introducing gang intervention mentors into the various explanations of gang entry and the research-based accounts of gang activity, mentors can have a better understanding of the population they are working with rather than pull together ideas from popular media.

Gang intervention and prevention strategies are heavily debated in media as well as research circles. Papachristos (2011) revealed most recently, how many gang intervention programs have not received evaluation that is up to social scientific standards. Still, some programs, such as Chicago’s “Operation CeaseFire” model, are heralded across the nation as an effective means of eradicating gang violence. What is perplexing is the lack of analysis regarding the individuals involved: law enforcement, community leaders, and service providers (Melde 2013). As this thesis explored was understanding not only how gang intervention work originates but examines whether
gang intervention programs fail or not. More research needs to consider the ideologies and social positions of those attempting to aid in restitution and rehabilitation in the hopes of erasing stigmatizing labels and more importantly, pulling back another layer of gang intervention strategy in the hopes of tackling this contemporary social problem.

VI. Sources


This definition of positive peer culture is provided by the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare (http://www.cebc4cw.org/program/positive-peer-culture/detailed).

Putnam (2000) defines ‘bridging social capital’ as bonds of connectedness between diverse groups of people (i.e. race/ethnicity, gender, age).

The amount of hours volunteering was tallied at the end of each week into steno book notes.


Pseudonym for the neighborhood location.

All names are pseudonyms.

Under Institutional Review Board criteria, prisoners are considered a vulnerable population. Research with vulnerable populations required full board review as well as approval processes through the criminal justice system. Because of my research timeline, I chose to take a different route to get at the mentoring relationship: in-depth interviews.

“Certified” means that juveniles are tried as adults and receive adult convictions for their committed crimes.

I borrow the concept of mentoring from Lockhart (2005:46), described as: “[a role] played by a staff person or a volunteer, who, often, having a higher rank in the work world, helps the newcomer learn the ropes of the new setting.”