

ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the relationship between drug use and gang involvement among coloured female drug addicts in the Western Cape, South Africa. Drugs and gangs are intertwined, but does this relationship still exist when looking at it from the drug addict's perspective? Males are more often the topic of research studies on the drug-gang relationship, and the views of gang members rather than looking at an alternative perspective is common. In-depth narrative interviews were conducted with seven women who all follow the twelve-step program suggested by *Narcotics Anonymous (NA)* and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis. This qualitative methodology generated five themes, namely childhood and school memories; victim of abuse and self-harm; using with a male partner; and gang relations and drug-gang myths. Among the women interviewed 'tik', heroin, and alcohol was the primary drugs-of-choice. An important finding among the females interviewed was that they were not directly involved in any gang but two of the participants were auxiliary members to gangs, and that not all drug dealers are gangsters. Also, all of them knew someone that is a gangster with only one whose relationship was related to her drug use. The information gained will be used to enrich the literature with a more holistic view of the lives of coloured female drug addicts.

Key words: gangs; gang-related activity; drugs; substance abuse; using

BACKGROUND

Gang Affiliation

The term 'gang' is difficult to define as the context in which they exist is constantly changing. It often (and almost always) carries a negative connotation. Bjerregaard (2002) noted that generally, most gang researchers use conceptual definitions which focus on how a gang is organized, as well as the purpose and the symbolic characteristics of the gang. Often, according to Lauderdale and Burman (2009), gangs would refer to groups of males whereas for females it may be called cliques. Street gangs and prison gangs are common phenomena in South Africa, more so, they are central to most communities on the Cape Flats (MacMaster, 2007; Peacock & Theron, 2007).

Historically, researchers only considered males to be real gang members (Dukes & Stein, 2003) which could be the reason why most of the literature is related to male gang affiliation; few published articles concentrate on female involvement in gangs (Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001; Lauderdale & Burman, 2009). We have a relatively limited understanding of participation and activity of female gang members, especially in comparison to what we know about male gang members (Hunt, Joe-Laidler, & Evans (2002). Many are of the impression that gang girls are not that common, but research estimates it to be 20-40% of all gang members (Klein, 1995). Females participate in most gang activities, including assaults, robberies, and the selling of drugs (Esbensen, Deschenes, & Winfree, 1999). More girls are being attracted to gangs, especially in the last decade (Shamai & Kochal, 2008; Staton, Leukefeld, & Logan, 2001), but Klein (1995) suggests that this rise in percentage female gang members could be due to increases in self-report and even more accurate observations by researchers.

A major theme among females concerning reasons for joining a gang is the need for protection and fear of rejection (Esbensen et al., 1999; Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001). An important motive for joining a gang for the participants of the Hunt et al. (2002) study was to make friends. These reasons along with peer pressure (Wang, 2000) from close friends leave them being faced with a difficult choice between joining the gang for protection or choosing victimization (Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001; Ward & Bakhuis, 2010). The study by Dukes and Stein (2003) revealed that girls may have joined the gang in an attempt to boost their self-esteem, whereas another common theme is that gangs provide status and advantages that other legal organizations cannot promise, like money (Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001; Wang, 2000). Bjerregaard (2010) argues that gangs provide a setting where criminal activity and support from your peers is the norm.

The most important reasons why gangs develop, according to Dukes and Stein (2003), are "poverty and social disorganization". This means that the type of environment that someone lives in is an important factor that determines gang affiliation (Wang, 2000). Gang members are more likely to come from high-crime neighbourhoods with fewer public resources (Seals, 2009) and live in single-headed households (Esbensen et al., 1999). However, according to the participants in Walker-Barnes and Mason's study (2001), father absence alone does not have such a major influence on female gang membership. This is in contrast to Seals' study (2009) that suggests that having a father-figure present in the home has a negative effect on gang involvement. These participants believe that for some girls, gang involvement is the key to attracting attention from their emotionally distant parents, and that in many cases getting involved with a gang is an intentional and planned decision (Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001). Gang involvement could be due to "a lack of parental love, care and guidance that pushes the female youth to seek external substitutes" (Wang, 2000, p. 622) that will welcome her with open arms.

The major roles that females fulfil in gangs is to provide sex and act as auxiliary members (Wang, 2000; Lauderdale & Burman, 2009), but Esbensen et al. (1999) states that this stereotype needs to be re-examined as Hunt et al. (2002) notes that in much of the gang literature females are shown to have a proactive role in gangs. In order to access material things and protection, girls romantically involve

themselves with gang members (Ward & Bakhuis, 2010), but females are no longer just accessories to male gangs (MacDonald, 2009).

One cannot separate gangs from drugs. They are intertwined; illegal drugs are primarily distributed by gangs (Thornberry, Huizinga, & Loeber, 2004 as cited in Seals, 2009), but in contrast to this, Bjerregaard (2010) shows that gangs are not heavily involved in promoting drug use or drug sales. Clearly the connection between gangs and drug sales are unclear. Spergel (1995) does not deny that such a connection exists between gangs and their involvement in illegal substances but argues that this relationship is ambiguous.

Drug use

The most commonly used drug is alcohol, as it is legal and easily accessible (Lo & Stephens, 2000). Hunt et al. (2002) found that marijuana is the most commonly used and most frequently used illegal drug globally, with 163 million people above the age of 15 reporting use in 2000/2001 (UNODC, 2003). According to the findings of the study by Etten, Neumark, & Anthony (1999), males were more likely than females to have an opportunity to use drugs such as marijuana, cocaine, hallucinogens and heroin, but just as likely to eventually use the drugs. This study also suggested that males and females were equally likely to use their first drug at the same age that they were provided the opportunity. Young men and women use common drugs at equal rates whether in a gang or not, and equal rates of hard drug usage was also found among non-gang members (Dukes & Stein, 2003). Hunt et al. (2002) and MacKenzie et al. (2005) found that the routes into drug use came through family members and/or friends and took place in or around the home.

Typically, the gratifying aspects of drug use for females have been unnoticed (Hunt et al., 2002). The long-term effect of adolescent drug use is not completely understood, but in women it has major relevance for developing various drug problems during adulthood. Multiple drug use in adolescence decreases due to social conformity, which decreases the risk of multiple drug problems during adulthood, but in the study by Stacy & Newcomb (1999) women with high levels of sensation seeking were more prone to multiple drug use.

Connection between drug use and gang involvement

Drug addiction is supported when becoming a gang member (Ward & Bakhuis, 2010) and Spergel (1995) argues that gang members are more likely to use drugs than non-gang members with marijuana being the most commonly used illicit drug among gang members. This parallels with the findings of MacKenzie et al. (2005) study than found that more than 96% of the gang members involved had tried marijuana in their lifetime. Drinking alcohol, selling drugs and carrying weapons are some of the major activities that gang girls engage in (Wang, 2000) – because it is less likely for them to get caught (MacDonald, 2009) – and Spergel (1995) notes that research has continually showed that these activities are frequent in a gang setting. Both Klein (1995) and Bjerregaard (2010) oppose this notion, because they have found that drug selling and use is common among individual gang members but that it is not central to the street gangs themselves. Some gangs have nothing to do with the dealing or use of drugs (Valdez & Sifanek, 2004), which further contrasts with arguments that gangs are involved in the use and distribution of drugs.

If legal routes for income are not available for gang members, Lauderdale & Burman (2009) suggests that drug dealing, extortion, and even prostitution may be their only means of support. The complex nature of gangs and their loyalties makes it that much harder for outsiders to thoroughly understand the role of gangs in the distribution of drugs. Generally, findings regarding gang involvement in drug use apply only to males (Lauderback, Hansen, & Waldorf, 1992), but they found that there is an increase in female involvement in gang related activities such as drug trafficking.

It appears that participation and acceptance of drug use in gangs are increasing over time and tend to vary by drug type (Bjerregaard, 2010), but drug use does not necessarily begin within a gang as many of the respondents in the Hunt et al. (2002) study had their first drug experience before entering into a gang. The MacKenzie et al. (2005) study highlights the extent to which initiation into drug use, primarily marijuana, may occur prior to joining a gang as many of the respondents had experimented with marijuana early on in their lives. Also, those who have not experimented with marijuana before joining the gang would probably be introduced and encouraged to try it as it is usually a shared activity in a gang.

AIMS

The intention of this research project was to contribute to limited available knowledge of the relationship between drug use and gang involvement among coloured female drug users in the Western Cape, South Africa. This project aimed to establish useful material that will enrich the literature and contribute to its growth. To date there is little information about female drug use patterns and none that takes the perspective of recovering addicts and their relationship to gangs, and this is especially true for coloured females in South Africa. This project, therefore, intended to generate information among their drug use patterns and their involvement with gangs, if any, by asking recovering addicts about their life experiences.

This project aimed to use the information gained to enrich the literature with a more holistic view of the lives of coloured female drug users in the Western Cape, South Africa. Using their individual experiences, I aimed to draw major themes that will contribute to the current knowledge in this research area.

METHODS

Qualitative Research using the Narrative Approach

“Qualitative research links human experience with social action” (Parker, 2005, p.1). We use qualitative research methods when we are searching for depth and meaning, when the data we will analyze is not quantifiable and the contexts in which they appear are complex and sensitive. It examines the lived experiences of people as they are in the world. Research is qualitative in nature when words and sentences are used to qualify and record information. Language provides a sensitive and meaningful way of recording human experience (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000). Researchers using qualitative methods believe that there is no objective truth to be discovered. It is for this reason that I used qualitative methods to gather information about the recovering female drug addicts. I wanted their voices to be heard, and I wanted their experiences to be recorded in an appropriate manner.

The story as a whole is important in narrative research and it could be in the form of a video, a picture, or an individual story, among others. Narrative research respects each individual story and studies the way that people perform themselves and produce ‘identities’. Narrative research discovers how individuals make sense of experiences that they might have had difficulty in describing so that it becomes true to them. Usually, narrative research focuses on individual stories based on ‘personal narratives’ (Parker, 2005). This is the type of narrative I focused on. What makes this study a narrative one, is the amount of story telling the participants engage in. A narrative has an open-ended agenda; I wanted the participants to tell me the story of their life and not merely answer questions. So the manner in which I asked questions invited stories into the narrative.

Participants

Participants were selected from *Narcotics Anonymous (NA)* meetings held in the Western Cape. I sat in on open-to-public (OTP) meetings and listened to the stories of the individuals present. At the end of a meeting, I approached suitable individuals and asked whether they would like to participate in this research project. We then set up a suitable date, time and venue for the interview to take place. All participants are recovering drug addicts, were born in South Africa and are South African citizens. All the participants were informed about the nature of and the reasons for conducting this research study. Before the start of the research, each participant signed consent forms and they were assured of confidentiality. All participants were reminded that they were not obligated to participate in the study and were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time, no questions asked. Participants were chosen on the criteria that they should be coloured females, older than 16 years, recovering drug addicts and are able to converse in English. The reason for choosing this specific target group was for ease of communication between me (the researcher) and the respondents. Also, the more specific the group of individuals means that there will be more specific knowledge that can contribute to this research area. A total of seven participants took part in this research project. I felt that this was a reasonable number of people to gain sufficient information for exploration into this research area using a qualitative method.

Data Collection

The information was gathered by conducting semi-structured interviews. An interview is a conversation between two or more people (the interviewer and the interviewee) where questions are asked by the interviewer to obtain information from the interviewee. It is an oral exchange of information (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 2009) and is a certain technique of data collection. The seven participants were individually interviewed based on a schedule of questions for a semi-structured interview, which is the most widely used method of data collection in qualitative research (Willig, 2001). I used a semi-structured interview to maintain the focus of the research, yet to remain flexible, and I invited stories into the conversation in such a way as to obtain information from the participants without limiting them from conveying information that they felt was important. The interviews were each tape-recorded with a calibrated tape recorder. After the interview was conducted, I listened to the data and transcribed it so that the transcriptions could be analyzed as text. Questions were asked in English and included 'Tell me your life story', 'How did you become an NA member?', 'What was your primary and secondary drug of choice?', 'Were you ever involved, or do you know anyone who is involved in a gang?', 'From whom would you get the drugs?' The interview schedule is provided as *Appendix A* below.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was the primary method of analysis used in this study. Thematic analysis is a flexible method for recognizing, analyzing and reporting themes within a data set; it is a commonly used qualitative method of analysis that acts as a useful tool to provide a rich and detailed account of the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A theme is something that captures an important part of the data in relation to the overall research question, and has some form of a pattern or meaning for the data set. The procedure that I adopted was based on Braun & Clarke's (2006) step-by-step guide to doing thematic analysis. I engaged in a more inductive approach in my analysis, which means that I recognized themes from the data set and then drew inferences from them. Braun & Clarke (2006) separated the steps into six phases. The first phase involved me reading and re-reading the data set and then making initial notes and ideas that came up. This phase came together very easily because I conducted and transcribed all the interviews myself and I was, therefore, already familiar with the data. After I familiarized myself with the data I recognized and coded parts of the data that I found interesting. Coding the data is the second phase of analysis and I manually coded the data using highlighters,

coloured pens and 'post-it' notes – as Braun & Clarke (2006) had suggested. In total I coded 27 items in the data set that I found particularly interesting and that related to my research question as well as some opposing notions regarding my research question.

From these 27 codes I moved on to the next phase in the analysis procedure which entails organizing the codes into potential themes and then identifying extracts from the coded data that are relevant to the themes. I placed the coded data into nine themes, each with sub-themes and aligned the extracts of the data with the themes. Phase four involves refining the identifying themes and this happens at two levels. Firstly, I read all the coded data within each theme and made sure that they were coherent with the theme and that they followed some kind of pattern. Secondly, I made sure that the themes that I identified were relevant to the entire data set and that there was an overarching pattern across the themes.

During phase five I further refined the identified themes by making sure that the names of the themes clearly explain what each theme is about, and also what aspect of the data each theme grasps. I put together a detailed analysis of each theme explaining what each theme is about and how it relates to the overarching story that emerged from the data. This is where I identified exactly what the themes are about and what they are not about. The written report and the final analysis tell the story of my data and is the final phase of data analysis, and this includes the data extracts.

REFLEXIVITY

I have always had a particular interest in substance abuse and gangsterism, and would like to specify my role in the process of analysis due to my life-history, experiences and beliefs. This interest was informed by a very narrow perspective of the relationship between drugs and gangs among females and also about drug addicts, their behaviors and their reasons for addiction. Attending *Narcotics Anonymous (NA)* meetings, resulted in personal growth and grounding not anticipated before the commencement of this study. The amount of respect, love and compassion that the self-proclaiming addicts have for one another in the *NA* meetings I attended has allowed me to get in touch with that part of myself again, and I really appreciated the warmth and respect that they showed towards me. This warmth extended into the interviews, and I would like to explain the extent to which my identity has impacted on the interviews themselves as well as the process of analysis.

As a coloured female from the Western Cape, I used my identity throughout the process of data collection and analysis. Being coloured brought commonality and familiarity of language and in some instances religion (Christian) between me and some of the interviewees. Although three of the participants were Muslim the concepts and terms they used were familiar. Although we shared a common race, we were different in many ways, such as age and family background, but their stories and way of expression made it easy for me to relate and understand. This project has given me a new perspective and broadened my thinking about recovering drug addicts and the lives that they lead.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This analysis takes the form of a list of identified themes and extracts that are rooted within an analytic narrative from the actual transcripts of the interviews to illustrate the data. I acknowledge that this is only one of many possible interpretations of the data, and I highlight this specific view to demonstrate the alternative perspective on the drug-gang relationship concentrating on the views of recovering drug addicts themselves. To my understanding, this view has not yet been expressed in the literature and I am hoping to show that the participants in this study were active addicts with no relations to gangsterism so we cannot say that drugs and gangs are always intertwined.

The analysis will emphasize the life experiences of the participants and their journey to recovery. The participants express their experiences from their childhood up to their current recovery status and going into detail about their first substance use, treatment, relapse and recovery in the form of a narration. The extracts provided were coded to distinguish between the participants. The participants are identified by a number according to the order in which they were interviewed and the first letter of their names. For example, the first participant is coded 1C and the second participant is coded 2F. The participant codes are provided in brackets after the quote. The analysis considers the sample as a diverse whole and provides extracts from all participants where relevant, sometimes a quote from only one participant is used to illustrate the analysis and at other times a quote from more than one participant is provided to better explain the overarching theme or sub-theme.

Due to the constraints of a word limit I have refined and combined the themes, from a list of nine initial themes to five themes across the data set. The themes are: childhood and school memories; victim of abuse and self harm; using with a male partner; the substance abuse cycle; and gang relations and drug-gang myths.

Childhood and School Memories

When speaking about their childhood, the participants were very explicit about their feelings when growing up and how their parents have played a major role in their perspective of their family setup. They referred to the types of family's that they grew up in and the situations they were put in as children. A lot of emotion was expressed when speaking about their childhood, which seems to be an important part of their life story.

The participants remember their childhood as either coming from a normal family or a dysfunctional family. One particular participant began her life story by telling me that:

Basically okay, as child I lived in very dysfunctional home, they appeared very functional on the outside but behind closed doors, extremely dysfunctional. (6K)

A participant with a similar view also witnessed substance abuse in her home, she said that:

Uhm... I grew up in a very dysfunctional family. Uhm... I was born out of wedlock and while I was growing up my stepfather was drinking very heavily. (4M)

Another participant told me that she comes from a normal family by saying that:

...my home life was very, very stable my parents are married uhm, there was no friction or anything like that of divorce or anything uhm, both my parents don't drink they don't smoke uhm, and my child life up until today still my parents they Christians, they go to church, they not saints but it's a stable relationship, so I don't come from a broken home... (5N)

These accounts show how different their childhoods were but they all still ended up abusing substances later on in their lives. This participant brought up religion as part of her family background which has been emphasized in the accounts of three other participants, as one stated:

...my dad actually, he was a very uhm... he followed religion and so does the rest of my family... Now I come from a very staunch family which I never ever like upheld, like I never went to mosque I don't wear scarf I don't do whatever and all that... (2F)

When thinking about their childhood three out of the seven participants made it explicit that they have difficulty in remembering certain parts of their childhood, one of the participants expressed that she may be blocking it out for a reason, which may or may not be the case for the other two participants with a similar difficulty. She said that:

...my memory is so 'fucked', you know, I don't remember anything from the age...from when you can remember; say from 7 'til about 14, no 'til 13. I don't have no memory, and that memory still all consist of my mother and myself. I have like uhm...you know, here and there I will barely remember things, but I don't. I think, you know, it's weird hay, 'cos I didn't have a 'kak' childhood, I had a happy childhood, I got

everything that I wanted, but for some reason I'm blocking it out, and the, the only reason I can think of is all the pain I put my mom through and, I...I feel very guilty... (2F)

Memories of being at school showed that there was a constant need to fit in and some of the participants blatantly said that they used to do this to please others; two of the seven participants called this "people-pleasing".

I got along well with people and I tried to fit in well with people. I'm someone that is very sociable and very, very talkative and outgoing and stuff, and therefore I mixed well in where I go. With different types of friends, I fit in well so I could adjust to what they were. So if I wanted to be with this clique, I'd be this type of person and if I was wanting to be with the cool kids I'd be that type of person... wanting to be with the "in" crowd,... (1C)

And, and, and the need to fit in and the need to please. Think I'm a big people-pleaser and, you know, when you have your friends at school, I'm not the...I'm the doer, I'm the follower, you know what I mean, like you get your cliques but uhm...you'll have the one that's the leader, now I'm not the leader, I don't fit in there, I'm the follow-the-leader. Say, let's do this I was always bets, I'm gonna go and whatever. So that was me, that all boils down to people-pleasing. (2F)

Some of the participants recall feeling left out and different from the other children:

Then high school uhm high school I always felt like you know that uhm even it started in primary school where I was always nervous to play with children because I felt left out, I always felt like a different person, a different child because that one has a nice house and I don't have, you know, always like what do you call less than other people other children... And then high school, I still felt I don't belong because I went to a school that was a little bit far from my house and all my friends stayed close to the school and I had to make that effort to go and to my friend, nobody came to my house. (3S)

Another account of feeling left out is provided in Appendix B1 below.

The participants also went to the extent of telling me their highest education level achieved. Passing Grade 12 is seen as an achievement in South Africa and among the seven participants, six passed Grade 12 of which two went back later to complete it after initially dropping out. The other participant also dropped out of school but she never went back to complete it.

...I didn't finish school, I dropped out of school and I was working and then I decided I wanted to go back to college to finish school. (1C)

And eventually like standard 9 that's why I can't remember because was so long on school, I was 3 years in standard 9 not because I was dumb because I wasn't at school, present or whatever. And uhm I didn't finish uhm matric and eventually I out of school and worked for my mom... (3S)

...and I managed to like fly through my matric year, you know, I did very well... (7I)

Even though three of the seven participants said that they come from normal functioning homes, their life experiences and personal traits are so similar to the other four participants who come from seemingly dysfunctional (in their view) homes. Their experiences are to some degree different when comparing their stories but what is clear is that gangsterism or direct gang-related activity did not play a role in their childhood or school careers. The closest experience of gang activity was in one of the participant's account where her boyfriend was a gangster, but she clearly states that she was not involved.

I think I got involved with a gangster at the time uhm... I think I was in standard 7 that time. And uhm... (cough)uhm it just went completely against everything that my family stood for and it really didn't matter to me at the time, you know, I was just very determined to, to just get out. We then started

dating, we dated for about four years and uhm...during that time I've witnessed also a lot of violence, I wasn't personally involved with, with the gang as such but being his girlfriend uhm I've seen a lot of things that I wasn't comfortable with. Uhm...ya, things got bad I think at the last year that we dated because he went to jail uhm... (4M)

This participant was the girlfriend of gangster, and even though she says that she was not involved in the activities of the gang she was still an auxiliary member. What should be emphasized though is that when she was in a relationship with the gangster, she was not yet involved in substance abuse so that link is then eliminated between drugs and her involvement with gangs.

Victim of Abuse and Self-Harm

Abuse comes in many forms, and in these accounts one or more types of abuse had taken place in six of the seven participant's accounts of their life story. The abuse came primarily from male persons who are somehow related to the participants, either a father, a step father, a brother, a friend, a boyfriend, or a husband. The abuse was primarily physical, sexual, and verbal/emotional. One of the participants expressed herself so sincerely about the sexual, physical, emotional and verbal abuse that she has experienced and how it has affected her, I have provided the full extract in *Appendix B2 below*. This is an excerpt of that particular extract.

I had a cousin who molested me, like I said my brother that sexually abused me for ten years, my dad was abusing me physically emotionally and mentally...I was raped again like four times, each time it was somebody very close to me. (6K)

Interestingly, a different participant explains how violent her husband would be with her but she doesn't acknowledge it as abuse.

And one day we got into such huge argument, there was this family function we had to attend, it was like a family braai thing and he was so wasted because of the night before he didn't wanna go with, and I said but you have to go with me because they will think that something is wrong and I have to put up this pretence, and we got into such a huge fight that we ended up like physically fighting. And he'd like never physically hit me but he'd like throw me into a cupboard or throw me into a wall that kind of thing, but I was the one that was fighting man... (7I)

My assumption is that by her saying that he "never physically hit me" shows that she might be trying to minimize the abuse because he didn't actually lift his hand to her. Abuse also occurred when under the influence of a substance:

Uhm, when I was, I have more consequences of my using then I needed to deal with like shameful things then that uhm, with my drinking, because I would drink and, and I wouldn't remember I'd have no control over what happens to me. You know uhm, and when I was matric I was raped. I, I passed out and when I came to one of my friends was having intercourse with me. You know, without consent. And I just scraped it under the carpet and I carried on. (5N)

This reaction is very common among the participants and other substance abusers; they never really deal with negative experiences in an effective way. "Scraping it under the carpet" doesn't take the issue and its effects away, and they almost have a habit of just accepting it and carrying on with their lives. *And I recall that one of my best friends had an older brother and when I used to go there over weekends, he used to molest me as well, yet I used to always go back there, strange but ya... (6K)*

Of the seven participants, three have tried to commit suicide or have contemplated suicide. These suicidal tendencies illustrate the degree to which these women were not coping with their lives, and this perhaps links to my previous argument that they don't deal with their experiences and this may lead to more serious consequences. Suicidal tendencies in this sample came to the fore during middle adolescence:

...and my book was lying there and my daddy took my book, and I was like oh 'fock'. And in that book I had just contemplated suicide, I couldn't deal with this life anymore, everybody's pissing me off and I was dying, you know, in my world... he also cried about the fact that I was saying I don't wanna live anymore and how much I hate this place and how I hate my parents, hate my family, hate my life, everything. Said he can't believe I feel that way, do I really wanna do that, and I looked at him and I said that was my diary that nobody was supposed to read, do you think I'm gonna lie in it? I really feel that way, you know. (6K)

, as well as adulthood when the substance abuse had already started taking a toll on the mind and the body:

And then uhm I... tried to commit suicide again, uhm...what happened was I was sitting at my best friends place and I tried to steal something , I can't remember what it was I think it was money or something, trying to steal money from her mother and her brother caught me and her brother came to tell my mother, and they live just opposite here so my mother called me over and had this big talk with me and I broke down and she left me alone for a bit and I cut my wrists, and uhm that night she took me to Groote Schuur Hospital and they booked me into the psych ward and I was on suicide watch I think it was for 3 days, and then from there they got me into Valkenburg Clinic, but I didn't tell them that I was on drugs I just told them that I was depressed and that I was suicidal and uhm that is why they kept me... (7I)

Of the six participants that were abused in some or other form over their life span it is clear that they never dealt with the abuse in a constructive manner. By ignoring the fact that it happened, they caused those emotions associated with the abuse to come out in different ways and in one case it the suicidal tendencies came back later in her life. What I want to make explicitly clear is that throughout these experiences of abuse or self-harm, these women did not seek outside satisfaction by joining gangs even though they had a drug habit to support. Even during adolescence they didn't seek that satisfaction from gangs when they couldn't cope with life anymore.

Using with a Male Partner

What I found particularly fascinating was that six of the participants had used with their male partner, either a boyfriend or a husband.

...you see the guys I meet; it was always about the drugs. I can't honestly say I ever had a healthy relationship where there was no drugs involved... (2F)

The substance abuse actually started with the husband with one of the participants where he introduced her to the drug and she really liked it and then couldn't stop. Another participant was also introduced to her drug-of-choice by her boyfriend, but it wasn't until later on that she got addicted to it.

... this one day he like told me uhm... ya, I'm gonna ask if you can use one day with me and my friends, you know, and then you can see how the feeling is, what's the feeling you sitting with... And uhm okay and I was using with them... And then I couldn't stop because I liked the feeling, I loved the first feeling and I love the feeling because what it did to us, because we were obviously so far apart and this drugs grew us, brought us back together... (3S)

The substance abuse would escalate once they got into a serious relationship and lived with their partner.

...me and Shaun, the drug dealer, got uhm close and he asked me if I wanted to be in a relationship... we then started dating and uhm everything was 'lekker' at the beginning and uhm it changed from weekends to every day... the moment we moved everything changed, you know... I had nobody close to me that know me as Mandy, it was just me and him and this little baby. (4M)

Marriage would involve extreme substance abuse where all that was important was the drugs, even on special occasions.

Then we got married and this was like when I found my freedom, you know, I moved out moved in with him, we were living alone, and we found our own dealer now so we didn't have to go visit this girl anymore because we could do drugs at home. And for the year of my marriage all we did was drugs, it was like an every day thing I couldn't wait for him to come home from work in the evening so we could use together... (7I)

I got married and some people when they go on their honeymoon they have sex. I drank and I smoked myself silly with my ex husband and that's what we did you know uhm. (5N)

Shockingly, the addiction of these participants got so bad that they continued using despite the welfare of their children.

... I see myself sitting in my lounge married with my too children sleeping, my ex husband working nightshift and I'm sitting in my lounge with a cum caliprince and a parcel of "dagga". With windows closed curtain closed phone taken out of the hook and that was my ultimate weekend. Spending alone in dark room and not wanting to be with anybody. My kids, I don't know how they got to bed my daughter was uhm, probably like a year old uhm, my son was three and they were in the way you know, nothing mattered besides my using uhm. (5N)

And they would even place their partner ahead of their children because of their addiction.

...our relationship was everything to me, you know, to the point of where my son got in the way of everything, my using, my relationship with Jade, I would leave my child for days at a time uhm with my parents and then I'll come back home and my parents would like, where the fuck have you been? It's just like mommy, I can't deal with you'se man, clearly I can't I didn't even know how to 'fucken' think straight 'cos half the time I'm not there. I was always, using, I was always high on something... (6K)

It is clear from these accounts that these participants substance abuse was the central focus of their lives when they were addicts. It is difficult to see where any gang relationship could be possible in their state of mind, because nothing else mattered besides the drugs.

The Vicious Substance Abuse Cycle

What I have found from the data is a particular cycle in which drug abuse takes place. This cycle always begins at the first substance use experience that either takes place with friends or a male partner (boyfriend or husband). There may even be a period where substance became the norm, this substance is usually weed and more often than not occurs during high school.

...it was just me wanting to have a good time I started drinking at about the age of thirteen or fourteen, and partying, and smoking weed at about the age of like fifteen or sixteen which was kind of a thing of wanting to be with the "in" crowd, everybody was doing it so I wanted to do it. (1C)

Then there is always a first experience with a substance that will later become their drug-of-choice. This experience is sometimes pleasant and other times not so pleasant.

And so, I had a best friend at the time and I went to go visit her one day, I actually was never introduced to drugs before, and it think I was 22 or 23 at the time uhm when I went to go visit her and things was a bit off, she was off, her mother was off, and I didn't really know what was going on, but I felt as if they don't want me there. And then I left, and I went to go visit them again and they were busy with 'tik', I didn't know it was 'tik' at the time and as they were passing this "instrument" with which they use to 'tik' with, they asked me if I want to and, at the time it was just to be playing around, experimenting and, I did it that night, I won't say I got addicted to it like the first time around uhm...but it didn't take me long to buy my own stuff and use. (4M)

One of the other participant's first experience with her drug-of-choice was not that pleasant and she didn't like the feeling or the taste at all, she even said that she would never use heroin again. Her

unpleasant experience didn't prevent her from using again. The extract that illustrates this is provided in *Appendix B3* below.

Then the extent of the drug use gets so bad that they end up having to steal and/or exchange items for money to support their habit.

...I used to get my own, I used to steal for my drugs and steal from my family and the house or wherever I can... (2F)

And my drug use had progressed at this point, I mean like I say I was using every day and I didn't think it, I still didn't think it was a problem because we were still managing to get by, paying our bills, paying our car, uhm living comfortably. But it was when we needed to use more that the money was running out and this is when things started to get unmanageable, you know, uhm there wasn't enough money to last us for the month so we started selling things or pawning things that we owned uhm I started stealing from my family, money, wherever I could, you know, cell phones was my thing, it was easy to sell a cell phone uhm and I became good at it, you know, I became good at being a thief. (7I)

Eventually their family or the participants themselves would realize that they have a drug problem and they would start looking at treatment options and eventually end up going to treatment for a period of time. For extracts about the extent to which their addiction had progressed to using every single day and having drugs on their mind all the time, refer to *Appendix B4, B5, and B6*. A participant explained how she was booked into treatment:

...and then my sister them booked me into uhm a out-patient program. And then I got to the out-patient program...I did my program 'lekker' 2 months clean... (3S)

For one of the participants, the first time she went into treatment she never relapsed again, so her substance abuse ends here.

...Uhm, I admitted to my parents then because... it was two o' clock the morning so I couldn't exactly lie and say there is nothing wrong and that is how I came to uhm, be honest I, I was high as a kite you know, when, when he came. And I'd tell him that you know, I have a problem I need help... and I ended up going to rehab uhm, I went to Kenilworth clinic in 2002 and my clean date was October the 25th and if it's by grace I'll be celebrating my 8th year in recovery the 25th of October uhm. (5N)

For others the cycle just continued where they had relapsed and fell back into the trap of substance abuse.

Uhm... and then I got clean for a while and then I used again. (1C)

So anyway, I will never forget it, I came out on the 5th of March, it was on a Friday, my brother came to fetch me and after that 3 weeks there you could just see like how I looked, I mean I looked healthy I had cheeks again, my skin cleared up and all that. And then, I came out the Friday, and then the very next day I used... (Silence)Then it went on for a year... (2F)

After the relapse some of them went straight back into treatment, others went back into using their drug-of-choice again, which takes us back to using the drug-of-choice for the first time, and then the cycle just continues from there until they go into treatment again and stay in recovery.

...so I went to treatment knowing for a while that I don't a fuck wanna get clean, I just wanted to stop using heroin it wasn't about stopping... So I went for detoxing and I was in there for 2 weeks and the first weekend they allowed me to come home I relapsed... Ya, then uhm... I went into treatment the second time, I didn't get to go back immediately I had to wait a month... I went to treatment and I did my 5 weeks stint... on the day I came out of treatment I was like hectically with Jade and... I just used that night and then parent's didn't see me till Monday..., I went home and then I was at home for about probably two or three weeks, stayed clean, found myself back to Jade, was using again, it went like that all the time, then I stop. (6K)

This account is a perfect example of how the cycle works, you start using, you get to the point of desperation, and then you go for treatment, relapse and start using again. What I found was that sometimes the participants have primary addictions other than drug abuse and this seems to have an influence on relapsing. Two of the participants admitted that their primary addictions were alcohol and an eating disorder, respectively. They explained that addiction is itself the problem, a 'disease' as they put, and not necessarily the type of substance or behavior.

I do firmly believe that addiction and alcoholism is hereditary uhm, and I'm the one out of my family that has got the disease of addiction uhm, it's not something that I, I believe I was born with it. Like cancer is a disease, I believe addition is a disease... I believe that alcohol is my primary addiction... was speed and I drank it and the only reason why I drank that was because it made me able to consume more alcohol. So it wasn't even about that it was always about the alcohol... (5N)

...after my pregnancy my eating disorder kicked in again, which is my primary addiction... at first it was the eating disorder and I started throwing up again, I started binging throwing up, binging throwing up uhm, you know like I would finish a whole bag of chips and I'll feel so guilty about it afterwards, which is exactly the same feelings that you get from using, you know, it was just that my drug of choice had changed to food now again. So everything was exactly the same it was just I was substituting it with food, I'd feel guilty because I overate and then I'd go throw up and then I'll feel worse, and then because I feel bad I comfort-eat, and it was the same cycle all over again. (7I)

Within this theme I found that the participants drugs-of-choice where 'tik', heroin, alcohol, and weed. Four of the participants were addicted to 'tik', two were addicted to heroin, and the one was addicted to alcohol but she used it together with weed. Collectively, the participants experimented with a wide range of drugs over their life and these include ecstasy, mandrax, speed, and 'rocks'. According to the available data set, I found that weed was tried by all seven of the participants whereas mandrax and 'rocks' were both only experimented by one participant per drug.

So ya, going into detail a bit more about the drugs then after weed, it was like what was it, it was ecstasy, a whole lot of ecstasy... but it was more like a party drug, I used to love going clubbing and stuff like that, that used to be my thing. So the years went on and it progressed to ecstasy and I then, fuck, I did everything, I looked terrible, I was terrible. (2F)

First I used to drink, then I stopped, then I smoked weed but when I was smoking weed I wasn't drinking. Because I didn't like the effects that it had on me, because it's like, for me it was silly. Y would you go buy a "upper" and then change your mind with a "downer", it was really silly actually, for me that's my personal opinion... When I started using "tik" I stopped drinking and I stopped smoking weed. So I only had one drug of choice. And when I was on "tik" I tried heroin and I really didn't like it so I really didn't do it again. (1C)

These accounts reflect the participants' life story. What should be emphasized is that even though they have experimented with a range of drugs and came into contact with many different people throughout their life, they did not directly engage in any gang-related activities even when the desperation of needing to use came to the fore. They had alternative methods of obtaining their drugs and went through countless measures to try and stop their substance abuse. And this will be further emphasized in the next theme.

Gang Relations and Drug-Gang Myths

When involved with drugs, there is a big possibility that you will encounter many different types of people of which gangsters are a part. But knowing a gangster doesn't mean that you are directly involved in the activities of a gang.

...it comes with using, you usually associate yourself with people that you wouldn't normally associate with, and those are normally people like drug addicts. I wasn't involved in gangsterism and gangs specifically, but friends of mine were gangsters. I never got involved in the whole gangster issue thing, but friends of mine were. (1C)

I was never really involved with gangsters, not that I know of, I mean, there was always different guys picking me up from school but, 'god' where they were junior mafias or Americans, I don't fucking know (giggling)...there was this one guy Kayfie ne, he was like a sort of like a head of the Americans ne, now you know what his deal was ne, he used to like parading with the pretty girls man, you know what I mean. So we'd go out on a Saturday night and I'll have my best outfit on, but... and then he'll feed us with drugs (2F)

Because participant (2F) was an accessory to a gang member and her presence there was an opportunity to get drugs, this situation shows that there is a possible link between gangsterism and drugs among females.

Being the girlfriend of a gangster or an ex-gangster was also something that came up in this sample. But they make it very clear that they were not involved in any of the activities themselves.

...I met my ex-husband also when it was still school... and then uhm my ex-husband he was a gangster, you know, like a normal gangster everything about gangster and whatever but because he was that kind of a guy I didn't wanna leave this one for that one... (3S)

She is referring to her current boyfriend when she says "this one".

... before I started dating my ex-husband he was in a gang uhm, we where, he was like fifteen sixteen and, and he was supposedly junky funky gang uhm, and he had to uh uhm, it was almost like a blood in blood out situation where he had to do something to get out of the gang uhm and uhm, I know he had to do uhm, what do you call that when they are in the car and they go like(a drive by shoot) and that is what he had to do to get out of the gang uhm, but other than that I didn't have anything to do with gangsters or gangs or anything like that. (5N)

Even when one of the participants was in jail for six months she didn't get involved in a gang.

...even when I was in prison, I wasn't in a gang; some are 'kak' violent and weird. Prison was funny and weird; nothing like the media portrayed it to be. (6K)

All seven of the participants said that they knew someone who is gangster, either a family member or a friend, but it wasn't related to their drug use.

...a cousin of mine is actually locked up in prison at the moment who is very, very intensely involved in gang related activity. He belonged to a gang and uhm he was also very heavily on drugs at the time and he was caught...my brother uhm when he was about 14 years old he was also on 'tik' for about 2 years and he was also involved in a gang at the time, you know, when they are that young the gangsters basically use them to do the small things, petty crimes for them, you know... (7I)

... I've got nephews that has been in jail for a long, long time and uhm they were involved with gangsters. (4M)

There is a myth that drug dealers are usually gangsters and that the drugs operate as part of the business of the gang. These participants have cleared this myth up for us regarding their personal

experiences and understandings, and what has been the overarching theme is that drug dealers are not always gangsters, but sometimes they are.

...he's not a gangster, he's like one of our biggest merchants in our area. But I wouldn't say that he is a gang leader or whatever, he is just a person, a dealer. (1C)

...what I can tell you is obviously there is a lot of gangsters that uhm that does deal with drugs, but I chose not to go by them... But pretty normal people sell it. Like my best merchant, it was a normal family and they basically sold it to 'focken' put food on the table. (2F)

The merchants that I, that I purchased my drugs from, I knew that they were gangsters. Yes, they were gangsters. (4M)

Drug dealers would be different depending on the type of drug that they sold. The one participant made it clear that heroin dealers are hardly ever gangsters. I acknowledge that this is her personal understanding and I understand that different people have different views about the same phenomenon and we can, therefore, not generalize this assumption to all heroin dealers.

Heroin dealers are never really gangsters, they all Tanzanians, Nigerians, uhm they all foreigners trying to make a living in Cape Town, unemployable and that is the way that they make a living. You will never find a heroin dealer, all heroin dealers are black, black foreigners. It's very seldom that you find a 'smokkie' selling heroin, they only deal in like 'tik' and mandrax and 'rocks', they very, very seldomly sell heroin, and if they do it's a Tanzanian or Nigerian supplying them. (7I)

Another myth is that drugs, gangs and prostitution are interrelated. None of the participants in my sample sold their bodies for drugs for money to buy drugs, but they all believed that if the desperation to use gets too much and there is no other option then prostitution is likely to happen. Because none of the participants were involved in any gang-related activity, it is difficult to maintain the myth that drugs, gangs and prostitution are interrelated among this sample.

I never, I always glamorised my using 'cos I never used to like sleep around for drugs, I used to get my own... But I think if I had to stay in it a bit longer, I would've. (2F)

I can't speak of something if I haven't witnessed it, you know, females selling themselves for drugs, but I've had one friend, in particular, that I knew that she told me herself that she actually stooped to that level to get drugs, not that I'm, I'm not judging her, it's just, you know, the point where uhm this disease can actually take you man, the desperation, so yes, from her experience I know that females do go down that route for drugs. (4M)

The participants in this study were very explicit about them not being involved in gangs, but what I found was that two of the participants were auxiliary members to gangs, the one was related to her drug use and the other was due to her relationship with her boyfriend (and not to her drug use). The accounts of the participants show that even though they were not directly involved with gangs, there remains some connection between drug users and gangs. What should be noted is that this is not always true and cannot be generalized to all drug users and gangs.

CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that the participants in the present study have certain similarities and differences between them. Similarities in that they have all been challenged in some or other way in their life but have eventually faced those challenges, acknowledged their addiction, got the necessary treatment and are now living healthier lives and continuing to work the twelve step program. They are different in their personal experiences and motives to stay clean, but they acknowledge that recovery is a lifelong process.

Narrative qualitative research examines the lived experiences of people and because this type of research accepts that there is no objective truth to be discovered I accept my findings as they are. There is no expectation for replicability of this study because we cannot make generalizations, but this study enabled us to acquire a deeper understanding of the life experiences of female recovering drug addicts and their views on the relationship between drugs and gangs. In addition, it is also important to note that this study is context-related and refers to coloured female recovering drug addicts in the Western Cape, South Africa. Thus, further research is needed to explore whether the described findings fits other contexts and cultures. Another limitation is that this study only examines seven participants, so future research should include a bigger sample. The data are cross-sectional and based on self reports, which limits any speculation about the directionality of the results. Despite these limitations, the findings should be taken into consideration whenever the relationship between gangs and drugs among females are being explored.