IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT OF THE INCARCERATED ADOLESCENT WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO PRISON GANG MEMBERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

The plight of the adolescent deprived of his liberty remains a problem in post-apartheid South Africa. Adolescence is characterised by the developmental crisis to form a unique identity ensuring greater interpersonal differentiation, mobilisation of resources and the acquisition of new coping skills to form identity capital and the establishment of a reciprocal relationship with conventional society. However, when surrounded by conflicting value systems in an artificial prison environment marked by isolation, overcrowding and deprivation, one could expect this to be mostly a painful and prolonged experience. The aim of this study was to focus on gang activity as a particular risk factor impacting negatively on role experimentation and identity development of the incarcerated adolescent. Gang membership may assist the incarcerated adolescent with development deficits to attain ego identity through the provision of an identity pathway – enabling him to attain his own expectations as well as that of the group. Through purposive theoretical sampling, 83 male incarcerated research participants were selected for participation in this study. The application of the standardised Erikson scale (Ochse 1983) proved to be reliable in correctional context. The findings of this study show that incarcerated adolescents that achieved a low level of identity development were significantly more members of prison gangs than those with a high level of identity development. It also transpired that research participants with a lower level of identity development were significantly more likely to have friends that belonged to a gang than those with a higher level of identity development. These findings concur with both of the views of Erikson (1968:185) and Marcia (1975:157; 1967:119) on the common lack of purpose, value and direction associated with the adolescent with identity diffusion. Without any sense of direction, identity diffused subjects usually experience feelings of worthlessness and their delinquency becomes often a tool of self-destruction. Frequently, they are impulsive and irresponsible, which are indicators of weak superego strength and therefore, also behavioural traits that could promote the committing of crime. This lack of purpose, value and direction rendered the incarcerated adolescent with a low level of a personal identity in particular vulnerable to gang membership being in want of fulfilment of his emotional and security needs. It is concluded that the dysfuntionality of these adaptations of the adolescent to institutional life could be viewed as "normal" reactions to a set of pathological prison conditions.

INTRODUCTION

As prior to the advent of South Africa's democratisation in 1994, the plight of adolescents deprived of their liberty remains a problem in post-apartheid South Africa. Despite the unique, critical and vulnerable nature of the developmental stage of adolescence, adolescents are frequently incarcerated in conditions of prison overcrowding, often as first and/or economic offenders. In a countrywide survey of presiding officers from lower and high courts (Steinberg 2005:13), it was found that 80 percent of the research participants claimed that they never or almost never consider the capacity of the correctional system to carry out a

sentence when imposing a sentence. In what could be perceived as a deprived and hostile prison environment, the incarcerated adolescent is confronted with the developmental crisis to achieve a unique sense of a personal identity.

CONCEPTUALISATION

The concept "identity" is derived from the Latin word *idem* which means "the same". It refers to the ability of an object to remain consistent or to form unity, or as in the case of the adolescent, uniqueness and sameness. The actual process of identity achievement is a multifaceted arrangement embracing a complex configuration of social and self-representations. Erikson (1956:57) considers the realisation of ego identity as the state in which the individual perceives him or herself as a unique individual, but whose aspirations, values and behavioural norms are integrated with those of significant others. The most fundamental and distinguishing aspect of ego identity would be the reconciliation of the individual's concept of self with that of others' recognition of him or her(self). Ego identity is therefore not a mere self-definition but denotes sharing essential self-characteristics with significant others.

According to Erikson (1959:89) the developmental stage of adolescence is in particular a critical and vulnerable phase for the establishment of a personal identity. Although not an exclusive product of adolescence, identity achievement becomes more acute during this developmental stage due the necessity to deal with considerable physical and cognitive changes, genital maturity, and the acquisition of productive skills. It refers furthermore to a consolidation of previous developmental stages whilst confronting the demands of an approaching adulthood in a complex modern society. However, when isolated and removed from society the incarcerated adolescent needs to form a unique identity outside the realms of conventional society.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

Confinement creates a prison community that requires from the incarcerated adolescent to adjust to unfamiliar values, traditions and social relationships. To survive a prison climate of deprivation and often degradation, inmates frequently detach themselves from the outside world in an attempt to construct a life within the prison or correctional environment. During this process of adaptation, they could experience changes in identity. These changes could be compared with the routine of stripping off civilian clothes as an attempt to strip off a personal identity (Peacock 2006:20). Concerning this process of institutionalisation, the objective of this study was to focus on gang activity as a particular risk factor impacting negatively on role experimentation and identity development of the incarcerated adolescent. Gang membership may assist the incarcerated adolescent with development deficits to attain ego identity through the provision of an identity pathway – enabling him to attain his own expectations as well as that of the group.

PRISON GANGS

Inmates subject themselves to informal social control by adhering to the inmate code, which is further reinforced by gang activities. Typically, gangs are authoritarian and totalitarian in structure and characterised by violence and intense rivalry for power and control. Gang codes require members to be obedient and loyal to fellow gang members and not to "snitch" or to co-operate with the authorities (Bonner 1999:65; Goyer 2004:36; Lötter & Schurink 1984:67).

Sloth-Nielsen (1998:47), who conducted interviews in a number of South African correctional centres, found that while some children and juveniles admitted to belonging to a gang most of them were extremely fearful of gangs and disclosing their gang membership. Fear of

retaliation was cited as a major reason for the lack of disclosure. Conditions in prison such as overcrowding, boredom and powerlessness provide excellent breeding grounds for the formation of gangs, and while membership is theoretically voluntary, the young inmate may be compelled to join a gang for his own protection as well as the gratification of needs.

Gang activities permeate almost every sphere of prison life in South Africa. In essence, there are three number gangs (26s, 27s and 28s) and of the other gangs, the Big 5s and Air Force are perceived as the most powerful. Antagonism and violent conflict are features that divide the gangs but each gang also has a distinct code of conduct, structure, symbolism, language, gestures and fantasies. For instance, the 26s engage mainly in monetary issues and stabbings whereas the main activities of the 28s are sex and prostitution (Gear & Ngubeni 2002:13; Goyer 2004:36; Lötter & Schurink 1984:67, 78, 81). Lötter and Schurink (1984:91) identify institutional complexes (functional imperatives) in which structural and systemic elements of prison gangs are employed for purposes of goal attainment. The particular gang code or gang law refers to the mode of goal attainment in relation to the recruitment, education, promotion, management, criminal justice, communication, security, warfare, sex and care-giving systems within and between the different gangs.

Steinberg (2004:24) is of the opinion that gangs are "locked in an eternal relationship with their captors". In other words, with the fostering of masculine traits such as bravery, solidarity and stoicism, the scope of the gang's imagination is exhausted by the very universe against which they rail. The more deprived the prison environment, the more value is attached to the said characteristics and the more the opportunity to re-enact power struggles based on the custodian-inmate relationship. This reactionary mode of adaptation is also evident from the construction of social meanings attached to "men" and "women" in prison. The majority of "women" or "wyfies" are under the control of gangs in prison and by largely defining "men" in relation to "men" and their masculinity, a re-enactment is also created of the patriarchal heterosexual model.

To assess the relationship between gang membership and the identity development of the incarcerated adolescent it was necessary to select a specific methodological approach. An exposition of the methodology and measuring instruments utilised for this study follows together with a presentation of the nature and characteristics of the sample.

METHODOLOGY

A quantitative research methodology was used for the purposes of this study. This allowed for a process of deductive analysis, moving from the theory of Erikson (1958; 1963; 1968) to the testing of the relationship between the independent variable (gang membership) and the operationalised dependant variable (identity) rather than inferring from a specific case study (inductive reasoning) to the sample as a whole (Hagan 1997:19). This approach allowed furthermore for the standardised measurement of the level of identity development of the research participants, rather than the "shifting of gears" to accommodate new issues previously not assumed to be of importance. The latter being a feature of a less linear or more qualitative research process.

The individual administration of semi-structured or non-directive interviews often associated with a qualitative research design (Esterberg 2002:83), is a lengthy and time consuming process and not suitable for a large sample as in the case of this study. A lack of standardisation of the data collecting process could render internal validity low, which together with the said time frame, were also points of criticism (Thom 1988:207) levelled against the research of Marcia (1975; 1967) on his assessment of different identity statuses. For the purposes of this study, it was therefore decided to assign numerical values to concepts

in a self-administered questionnaire which in turn were statistically analysed in tandem with a standardised scale (Erikson scale).

Twelve research participants were included in a pilot study prior to the undertaking of the entire data collection process. According to Babbie (1990:220) a pilot study is useful to anticipate and eradicate any problems in the field prior to undertaking the research. Furthermore, it served as an indicator of the time-frame (30–45 minutes) required for purposes of the completion of the questionnaire and Erikson scale.

Erikson scale

Ochse (1983) developed a standardised identity scale based on Erikson's theory specifically for the South African context. The scale can be used for both male and female adolescents (15–19 years) and has tested to be reliable in terms of cross-cultural comparisons of Afrikaans, English and African language speaking groups (Ochse & Plug 1986:12444; Thom 1988:210; Thom & Coetzee 2004:188).

The Erikson scale consists of the following five sub-scales: trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame and doubt, initiative versus guilt, industry versus inferiority and identity versus identity diffusion. The scale includes an overall of 59 items that create a single score pointing to the degree of identity development of an individual. Some items are written in the reverse, in other words, a high score indicates a low level of identity development. These questions were scored in reverse before the total score per research participant was calculated, also prior to determining the reliability of the scale. The final score for the scale was calculated by obtaining a sum across all the items (1 = never, 2 = seldom, 3= fairly often and 4 = very often), therefore the maximum score that any person could have obtained was 236 (4 times 59), while the minimum was 59 (1 times 59). The higher the score the more developed was the identity construct.

The reliability of the scale refers to the degree of relatedness of the individual items in one factor or scale/construct (Rosnow & Rosenthal 1996:124). To determine the relatedness of the items in the identity development scale, the Cronbach alpha was calculated. Groves, Fowler, Couper, Lepkowski, Singer and Tourangeau (2004:264) explain that when many different questions are used to assess the same construct, the Cronbach alpha is a widely used method of determining reliability.

The Cronbach alpha has a range of 0 - 1, where 0 is no internal consistency and 1 is the maximum internal consistency. A general rule of thumb for determining what constitutes a good internal reliability is given at 0.75 (Terre Blanch & Durrheim 1999:90). The Cronbach alpha of the Erikson scale is 0.78. This value is above that of the cut off points suggested by Terre Blanch and Durrheim and is therefore considered an indication that the scale is reliable. This confirms that the Erikson scale could be well utilised in different contexts, ranging for instance from its successful administration within the educational environments (Ochse & Plug 1986:12444; Thom 1988:210; Thom & Coetzee 2004: 187) to its reliable application in correctional context.

SAMPLING PROCEDURE

Due to practical constraints it was not feasible to collect a random sample of all incarcerated adolescents in South African prisons. A random sample within a single correctional centre would only yield randomly obtained data applicable to a single centre and would also not be representative of the universe of incarcerated adolescents in South Africa. It was therefore decided to employ a purposive theoretical sampling technique. According to this technique the aim was to create an operational population, in other words, a population that is

theoretically constructed in such a manner that it represents the ideal (Bless & Higson-Smith 1995:95; Gilbert 1993:74). With identity development reaching its peak during adolescence (Erikson 1959:89; 1968:132) the aim was to furthermore include adolescent male participants from the middle years of adolescence because their identity establishment is no longer dominated by physiological changes but rather develops along personal, social and cultural dimensions of personality (Adamson, Hartman & Lyxell 1999:22; Dreyer 1980:14; Thom 1988:216). In addition, it was imperative that all of the select elements of the sample could read and write English for purposes of the self-administration of the data collection instruments. Once the above-mentioned criteria were exhausted the sample size totalled 88 incarcerated adolescents in a select correctional centre. Due to incomplete and or corrupt data received from five participants, their responses were excluded from the study, arriving thus at a sample size of 83 research participants.

DESCRIPTION OF SAMPLE

The following discussion focuses on characteristics of the sample, namely chronological age distribution, cultural and ethnic characteristics, home language and level of education of the research participants as well as frequency distributions of offences committed, length of prison sentence and length of time incarcerated.

Table 1 refers to the chronological age distribution of the sample.

Table 1
Age Distribution

	N	%
15 years	1	1.21
16 years	8	9.63
17 years	18	21.69
18 years	56	67.47
Total	83	100.00

The sum (Σ) of the ages in the sample is 1 457 while the mean age of the sample is 17.54 years. Fifty-six (67.47%) of the participants are 18 years of age whereas the youngest participant is 15 years old. This age distribution can be mainly attributed to the sampling requirement of English language proficiency as criteria to have been selected as a suitable participant for the purposes of this study. Chronological age and level of education obtained, is usually associated. It is also possible that younger offenders are not as frequently incarcerated than their older counterparts.

In Table 2 an exposition is given of the cultural groups to which the research participants belong.

Table 2
Cultural Group

Cultural group	N	%
Asian	1	1.21
Black	64	77.10
Brown	17	20.48
Other	1	1.21
Total	83	100.00

The majority of the participants, namely 64 (77.10%) are black, followed by 17 (20.48%) brown (previously so-called "Coloureds") participants. While only one Asian participated, the research participant who indicated himself as "other" is a person who identifies himself as an Afrikaner although having African parents. This participant's first language is Afrikaans.

In addition to cultural group, the specific ethnic group that the participants belong to was also asked. Table 3 presents the number and percentage of participants in each ethnic group.

Table 3
Ethnic Group Distribution

Ethnic group	N	%
Zulu	24	28.92
Tswana	10	12.05
Afrikaans	9	10.84
Pedi	7	8.43
Sotho	7	8.43
Brown (Coloured)	5	6.02
English	5	6.02
Ndebele	4	4.82
Xhosa	4	4.82
Shangaan	3	3.62
Swazi	2	2.41
Venda	2	2.41
Other	1	1.21
Total	83	100.00

The three largest ethnic groups are represented by the Zulus, namely 24 (28.92%), then the 10 (12.05%) participants from the Tswana group and thirdly the nine (10.84%) participants from the Afrikaans group. "Other" refers to the participant mentioned in the discussion following Table 2.

Table 4 presents the home language distribution of the sample.

Table 4
Home Language

Home Language	N	%
Zulu	27	32.53
Afrikaans	13	15.66
Tswana	10	12.04
English	7	8.43
Pedi	7	8.43
Sotho	6	7.23
Xhosa	6	7.23
Ndebele	3	3.62
Tshivenda	2	2.41
Xhsonga	1	1.21
Swazi	1	1.21
Total	83	100.00

The home language of participants reflects the ethnic group distribution yet some differences were recorded. This could be attributed amongst others to identification with the ethnic group of one parent (e.g. the father) but adopting the language of the other (e.g. the mother). Most research participants, namely 27 (32.53%) speak Zulu as their first language, followed by 13 (15.66%) who speak Afrikaans and 10 (12.04%) who speak Tswana.

In Table 5 the level of education of the sample is given. One research participant omitted to indicate his level of education. Concerning the level of education of the research participants, most have either obtained an education up to grade 8 - 9 (24.39%) or Grade 10 (28.04%). There are only five (6.10%) who had no schooling. A reason for this low incidence of a lack of formal schooling in the sample may be that only those who could read and write English were included in the study. A few participants (8) have completed matric (Grade 12) or have obtained a Trade qualification (9.8%).

Table 5
Highest Level of Education of Research Participants

Schooling	n	%
No schooling	5	6.10
Up to grade 4 (std 2)	4	4.88
Grade 5,6 and 7 (std 3-5)	12	14.63
Grade 8-9 (std 6-7)	20	24.39
Grade 10 (std 8)	23	28.04
Grade 11 (std 9)	10	12.20
Grade 12 (std 10)	3	3.66
Trade e.g. N1	5	6.10
Total	82	100.00

Of the research participants, 80 (96%) were in prison for the first time, while three (4%) were recidivists. In accordance with the classification system of the Department of Correctional Services (DCS), the types of offences for which the research participants have been incarcerated are grouped into four categories, namely, aggressive, economic, sexual and "other". The category, "other", includes social fabric crimes, such as drinking in public, or trespassing as well as offences such as kidnapping, malicious damage to property, possession of burglary tools and an possessing as unlicensed fire-arm. None of the research participants were incarcerated for narcotic offences, a fifth category used by the DCS. This concurs with the research of Dissel (1999:9), which shows that imprisonment is seldom used for adolescents convicted of drug offences.

The respective categories and the percentage of participants who committed each offence are presented in Table 6.

Table 6
Type of Offence

Offence	N	%
Aggressive	41	49.40
Economic	25	30.12
Sexual	11	13.25
Other	6	7.23
Total	83	100.00

From Table 6 it is apparent the 41 (49.40%) of the research participants are in prison for aggressive offences such as murder, attempted murder, robbery, aggravating robbery and assault to cause grievous bodily harm. A further 25 (13.12%) have been incarcerated for committing economic offences such as housebreaking, theft and fraud, whilst 11 (13.25%) have been sentenced to prison for committing sexual offences such as rape and indecent assault. The six (7.23%) who fall into the category "other" have been sentenced for kidnapping, malicious damage to property, possession of burglary tools and possessing an unlicensed fire-arm.

Besides the actual offences committed, data was obtained to indicate the length of prison sentences. This is presented in Table 7.

Table 7
Length of Prison Sentence

Length	N	%
More than 5 years	17	20.48
4 – 5 years	22	26.51
2 – 3 years	16	19.28
1 – 2 years	17	20.48
7 – 11 months	5	6.02
3 – 6 months	6	7.23
Total	83	100.00

Whereas only 11 (13.25%) research participants have short sentences ranging from 3 to 11 months, 55 (66.27%) have been sentenced for periods ranging between 1 and 5 years and 17 (20.48) have sentences exceeding five years. Despite their relatively long prison sentences, most of the research participants have not been in prison for longer than a year. Of the 76 (91.57%) research participants, 30 (39%) have been incarcerated for less than one year.

A cross-tabulation between the types of crimes and the length of the prison sentence is set out in Table 8.

Table 8
Cross-tabulation between Length of Prison Sentence and Type of Offence

Length of prison sentence	Offence							
	Aggressive		Economic		Sexual		Other	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
3-11 months	1	2.44	7	28.00	2	18.18	1	16.67
1-2 years	7	17.07	8	32.00	1	9.10	1	16.67
2 years and longer	33	80.49	10	40.00	8	72.72	4	66.66
Total	41	100.00	25	100.00	11	100.00	6	100.00

Table 8 shows that in terms of short sentences, the economic group dominates. Whereas 28.00 percent of economic offenders received sentences of less than one year, few aggressive offenders (2.44%) as well as sexual (18.18%) and "other" offenders (16.67%), were given such short sentences. Most of the aggressive offenders (80.49%) were sentenced to prison for a period of two years and longer, followed by the sex offenders (72.72%) and "other" group (66.70%). Of the economic offenders, 40 percent were sentenced to prison for a period of two years and longer.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The average scores obtained on the Erikson scale administered to the research participants (N 83) are given in Table 9.

Table 9
Average Scores of the Research Participants on Level of Identity Development Achieved

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	*M*	SD
Identity	83	134	228	165.42	17.84

The highest score of a single research participant on the scale was 228 while the lowest score was 138. The average was 165. The standard deviation, which is relatively small indicates that 68 percent of the participants rated between 183.26 and 147.58. The mean score of 165.42 is lower than the South African white male (173.97) and black male adolescent research participants (176.85) as was recorded in the study of Thom and Coetzee (2004:188). Ochse and Plug (1986:1243) included in their study different age groups rendering their sample not homogenous with this study in terms of chronological developmental age.

Gang membership could have had a profound influence on the identity development of the research participants. To assess this relationship, exploratory and descriptive data was firstly collected where-after a Pearson product-moment correlation was conducted to determine linear relationships between the level of identity development achieved by the research participants and their gang membership. The level of statistical significance is usually set in terms of the risk or willingness to be in error in not supporting the null hypothesis (accepting a significant relationship). Customarily, the 0.05 probability is used ($p \leq 0.05$) as the minimum acceptance level for statistical significance (Hagan 1997:357). This implies one is willing to be 95 percent confident that the relationship between two variables is a real one,

however, willing to accept being in error five times out of a hundred. For the purpose of this study, the significance level of 0.05 was considered adequate.

GANG MEMBERSHIP AND IDENTITY

With reference to the pioneering work of Lötter and Schurink (1984) on gangs in South African prisons and more recent research (Gear & Ngubeni 2002:13; Goyer 2004:36; Sloth-Nielsen, 1998:67), the data collected from the research participants confirmed that prison gangs remain a common phenomenon in South Africa. Irrespective of the length of time served of their prison sentence, 96 percent of the research participants indicated that they were aware of the existence of gangs in prison. Most of the remaining four percent (three research participants) did, however, indicate at a later stage that their friends or they themselves belonged to a gang. It can therefore be assumed that all of the research participants (N = 83) were aware of gangs in prison but that it remains a potentially sensitive topic to discuss. One research participant declined to provide any responses on the topic. Seventy one percent of the research participants indicated that their friends were members of a prison gang.

Tables 10 and 11 summarise the motives for belonging to a prison gang.

Table 10
Reasons for Friends of the Research Participants to Belong to a Gang (n=59)

Variable	N	%
To be protected against other gangs	40	68.00
To be protected against inmates	47	80.00
To be protected against members (prison officials)	27	46.00
To feel that they have a place where they belong	38	64.40
To help them to know what is expected from them in prison	40	68.00
To get drugs (e.g. dagga)	34	58.00
To get sex	26	44.10
To get cigarettes, sweets or food	40	68.00
To get blankets	38	64.40
To get clothing or shoes	44	75.00
For status	40	68.00

Table 10 shows that 80 percent cited protection against other inmates as the most common reason for their friends to belong to a prison gang. This was followed by 75 percent who indicated the acquisition of clothing or shoes, 68 percent for protection against other gangs, 68 percent for behavioural directives in prison, 68 percent for status and the acquisition of tobacco, sweets or food and 64 percent to get blankets. In most of the cases (64%), gang membership was also cited as functional in terms of satisfying needs of affiliation, or "to belong". This was followed by the need for drugs such as dagga (*cannabis sativa*) ranking at 58 percent.

Table 11 refers to the motives of the research participant for belonging to a prison gang.

Table 11
Reasons for the research participants to belong to a gang (n=24)

Variable	N	%
To be protected against other gangs	12	50.00
To be protected against inmates	13	54.16
To be protected against members (prison officials)	11	46.00
To feel that they have a place where they belong	14	58.33
To help them to know what is expected from them in prison	13	54.16
To get drugs (e.g. dagga)	10	42.00
To get sex	6	25.00
To get cigarettes, sweets or food	16	67.00
To get blankets	13	54.16
To get clothing or shoes	15	63.00
For status	15	63.00

Obtaining tobacco, sweets and food in the prison economy was cited as the most important reason by 67 percent of the research participants to belong to a gang. This was followed by 63 percent who indicated the need for clothing, shoes and status. In most of the cases (58%), the need to belong was an important factor. Protection against other inmates (54%) and the provision of behavioural directives (54%) followed with the need for blankets in prison (54%). Forty six percent of the gang members cited protection against prison officials as an important reason to belong to a prison gang, followed by the acquisition of illicit substances (42%) and sex (25%).

The two sets of data (Tables 10 and 11) reveal deprived conditions of the correctional environment of the research participants. Gang membership avails in the provision of the most basic commodities in prison such as clothing, shoes, blankets and food but also tobacco and sweets. Apart from satisfying basic physiological needs it also attends to security needs, albeit in relation and/or opposition to other inmates, gangs or prison officials. It furthermore satisfies emotional needs such as the need to belong and to be of value and provides the incarcerated adolescent with behavioural directives in what could be perceived as a potentially explosive environment. Gang membership refers also to high-risk activities such as the facilitation of sex and provision of illicit substances and could favour the abuse of power of corrupt prison officials. However, not all of the research participants were members of a gang.

Gang membership may assist in particular the incarcerated adolescent with development deficits to attain ego identity through the provision of an identity pathway – enabling him to attain his own expectations as well as that of the group. Table 12 shows the correlation analysis between gang membership and the identity development of the incarcerated adolescent.

Table 12
Correlation between Gang Membership and Identity Development

Variable	r	p-value
Friends in a gang	-0.28	0.012*
Personal gang membership	-0.27	0.014*

* = p ≤ 0.05

According to Table 12 incarcerated adolescents that achieved a low level of identity were significantly more members of gangs than those with a high level of identity. It also transpired that research participants with a lower level of identity development were significantly more likely to have friends that belonged to a gang than those with a higher level of identity development.

These findings concur with both of the views of Erikson (1968:185) and Marcia (1975:157; 1967:119) on the common lack of purpose, value and direction associated with the adolescent with identity diffusion. Without any sense of direction, identity diffused subjects usually experience feelings of worthlessness and their delinquency becomes often a tool of self-destruction. Frequently, they are impulsive and irresponsible, which are indicators of weak superego strength and therefore, also behavioural traits that could promote the committing of crime.

This lack of purpose, value and direction rendered the incarcerated adolescent with a low level of a personal identity in particular vulnerable to gang membership, being in want of fulfilment of his emotional and security needs. With limited identity material available to him in prison and with a precarious sense of self, one can expect that he will be progressively replacing his identity with the corporate identity of the gang. This lack of stable self-definition may increasingly become a tool of self-destruction as it may be sometimes easier for him to derive a sense of identity out of identification with what he is least supposed to be, than to

struggle with societal demands in a confined and deprived prison environment that he cannot meet. According to Erikson (1956:113) the collective identity of the group (gang) could both encompass and complete the identity of the less self-directed adolescent through the linking of common identities in an aggressive ideological struggle.

The findings of this study illustrate the significance of the correctional or prison environment on the formation of adolescent identity. The loss of a sense of a personal identity could be expressed in hostility towards the roles offered as proper and desirable by normative society. Any aspect of the required role, or all of it - be it masculine or feminine, nationality or class-membership - can become the main focus of the young person's disdain (Erikson 1968:172; 173). Gang membership may thus impact on the unsuccessful resolution of the developmental crises associated with adolescence and may furthermore generate and amplify identity diffusion that is characterised by time diffusion, identity consciousness, role fixation, work paralysis, bisexual and authority confusion, as well as value confusion.

Identity achieved subjects are usually more self-accepting and display a more stable self-definition (Adamson & Lyxell 1996:580; Kumru & Thompson 2003:482). Furthermore, Marcia (1975:155) as well as Stark and Traxler (1974:31) have found that adolescents with a high level of identity achievement are secure about their career choices and have in general, relatively low anxiety levels. Bernard (1981:353), La Voie (1976:379) as well as Meeus, Iedema, Helsen and Volleberg (1999:429) established a positive relationship between strong identity development and a positive self-esteem as well as successful overall adjustment. Well-adjusted adolescents also display a strong sense of security with regard to their sexual and physical identity (Tasker & McCann 1999:51). Furthermore, there is a positive correlation between high levels of identity achievement and the ability to solve intellectual problems (Berzonsky, Macek & Nurmi 2003:113; Chapell & Overton 2002:314; Klaczynski, Fauth & Swanger 1998:204; Leadbeater & Dionne 1981:118). On the other hand, identity diffused adolescents such as the adolescent gang members in this study, usually lack self-control and coping skills (Hardwick & Rowton-Lee 1996:269; Jensen 1973:470; Maphila 2000:73; Veneziano & Veneziano 1987:100; Waldo & Dinitz 1967:197). From this one may argue that a strong sense of a personal identity will enhance self-control and coping skills. Moreover, a strong identity may act as a barrier against gangstersim and environmental or prison conditions that favour the committing of crimes.

CONCLUSION

Strong identity development (ego identity) and identity diffusion refer to contrasting outcomes of the psychosocial crisis that occurs during adolescence. Under normal circumstances, group membership could provide the adolescent with directives to ensure feelings of conformity and continuity. However, outside the realms of conventional society, the value and emotional significance of attachment relationships to prison gangs signals an overall loss in identity. As result of a loss of attachment to other role models, the gang provides the incarcerated adolescent with a corporate identity and behaviour directives that assist him in his efforts to cope with the fears of a fragmented identity in a hostile and deprived prison environment. The dysfuntionality of these adaptations of the adolescent to institutional life could therefore be viewed as "normal" reactions to a set of pathological prison conditions.

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