Enhanced Critical Incident Technique Investigation of Girls' Perceptions of Prosocial Connectedness in a Wraparound Program
Investigation par la technique améliorée d'analyse d'incident critique des perceptions des filles au sujet de la connexion prosociale dans le cadre d'un programme global

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ABSTRACT

Women and girls are being implicated in gang-related operations at alarming rates. Anti-social gang behaviours such as drug trafficking, sexual exploitation, gun violence, and street entrenchment are of particular concern. British Columbia has seen a rise in gang-associated violence and homicide directed at or involving women over the last decade. Positive youth development initiatives such as the one in this study aim to support youth currently involved in or at risk of being involved in gangs. School personnel identify students who are exposed to anti-social gang behaviours and refer them to a wraparound program where they are matched with an adult mentor who works with them and their families to facilitate prosocial connections to five life domains: (a) school, (b) community, (c) home, (d) prosocial peers, and (e) the self. A 2012 evaluation report determined the program to be effective in reaching its objectives with a predominantly male population (84%). However, between 2015 and 2016, the program dramatically increased its responsiveness to girls, with a nearly 50% increase in female referrals. Using the enhanced critical incident technique (ECIT), the purpose of the study was to describe how female-identifying students articulate "prosocial connectedness" within the context of their experiences in a school-based wraparound gang prevention program. Critical incidents were collected by the first author, who interviewed eight girls and asked them the following: "What has helped/hindered/would have better helped facilitate your prosocial connectedness?" Findings were organized into 34 categories. ECIT analyses point to the effectiveness of using a relational/attachment model to inform strategies for gang prevention and school-based intervention in female youth.

RÉSUMÉ

Les femmes et les jeunes filles sont de plus en plus impliquées dans des activités liées aux gangs. Des comportements antisociaux de gangs comme le trafic de drogue, l'exploitation sexuelle, la violence par les armes, et l'itinérance sont devenus des préoccupations majeures. Au cours de la dernière décénie, on a vu en Colombie-Britannique une recrudescence de la violence des gangs et des homicides à l'endroit des femmes ou les impliquant. Les initiatives de développement positif des jeunes, comme celle qui est décrite dans cet article, visent à venir en aide aux jeunes susceptibles de se joindre à des gangs et qui y sont déjà intégrés. Les membres du personnel dans les écoles identifient les étudiantes et les étudiants les plus exposés aux comportements antisociaux des gangs et les dirigent vers un programme global dans lequel ils peuvent être jumelés à un ou une mentor adulte qui travaille avec le jeune et sa famille en vue de susciter les liens sociaux dans cinq domaines : (a) l'école, (b) la collectivité, (c) la maison, (d) les pairs prosociaux, et (e) le soi. Selon un rapport d'évaluation publié en 2012, le programme semble réussir à atteindre ses objectifs auprès d'une population à prédominance masculine (84 %). Cependant, entre 2015 et 2016, le programme a sensiblement accru ses interventions auprès des filles, soit un accroissement de près de 50 % des prises en charge de femmes. En misant sur la technique améliorée de l'analyse d'incident critique, l'étude avait pour but de décrire de quelle façon les personnes étudiantes s'identifiant de sexe féminin concevaient la « connexion prosociale » dans le contexte de leurs expériences dans le cadre d'un programme global en milieu scolaire de prévention des gangs. Les incidents critiques ont été recueillis par la première auteure qui interviewa huit filles et leur posa la question suivante : « Qu'est-ce qui a contribué ou nui ou aurait pu contribuer à faciliter votre connexion prosociale? » Les résultats furent regroupés sous 34 catégories. La technique améliorée d'analyse d'incident critique semble indiquer l'efficacité de recourir au modèle relationnel ou d'attachement pour élaborer des stratégies de prévention des gangs et effectuer des interventions en milieu scolaire à l'intention des jeunes filles.

The organizational structure and demographic of the Canadian street gang is changing. Once considered a male-dominated arena, the street gang[1] or "youth gang" as it is otherwise known is no longer off limits to girls and women (McKee, 2009). British Columbia (BC) has seen a rise in gang-related violence and homicide over the last three decades. Public Safety Canada (2012) submitted a report in which they estimated that 16% of BC's gang population is female. Today, this number is thought to be much larger, with young women and girls being recruited for gang-related operations at alarming rates (Abbotsford Youth

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1 "[A gang is] any denotable … group [of adolescents and young adults] who (a) are generally perceived as a distinct aggregation by others in their neighbourhood, (b) recognize themselves as a denotable group (almost invariably with a group name), and (c) have been involved in a sufficient number of [illegal] incidents to call forth a consistent negative response from neighbourhood residents and/or enforcement agencies" (Klein and Maxson, cited in Shelden et al., 2013, p. 23).

Commission, 2010). While it remains somewhat unclear what roles these girls are occupying in their gang affiliations, we do know that this population faces unique risks such as forced drug trafficking and sexual exploitation in comparison to their male counterparts when it comes to gang involvement (Batchelor, 2009; Hutchinson, 2013). A paradigmatic shift in our conceptualization of gangs and gang-related behaviours is underway, necessitating a re-evaluation of our approach to intervening.

The Wraparound philosophy was first adopted in the United States in the early 1980s. The process was designed to improve the lives of individuals and their families with complex needs through a collaborative and team-based approach (VanDenBerg et al., 2003). As outlined by the official Wraparound resource guide, the process can best be described as one that aims (a) to create, implement, and monitor an individualized plan using a collaborative process driven by the perspective of the family, (b) to develop a plan that includes a mix of professional supports, natural supports, and community members, (c) to base the plan on the strengths and the culture of the youth and their family, and (d) to ensure that the process is driven by the needs of the family rather than by those of the services that are available or reimbursable (VanDenBerg et al., 2003).

The Surrey Wraparound Program (WRAP) was created in 2009 in response to gang activity and youth crime in Surrey, BC. It is a school-based positive youth development program that is guided by research-informed literature on Wraparound philosophy (VanDenBerg et al., 2003). WRAP provides youth between the ages of 11 and 17 opportunities to be mentored by prosocial adults. Their job is to engage the youth through recreation, volunteer and leadership opportunities, individual and family counselling, substance and mental health support, and life skills training. WRAP endeavours to increase client attachment to five domains: (a) school, (b) community, (c) family/home, (d) prosocial peers, and (e) the self. Supported by a team of staff facilitators including a manager, a youth diversity liaison, a substance abuse liaison, and a youth interventionist from the RCMP, the young person is encouraged to have "voice and choice" when making important life decisions throughout their engagement with the program.

Parents, caregivers, and/or guardians are included in goal setting if and when appropriate. To be referred and admitted to WRAP, students must exhibit what the Surrey School District refers to as "gang associated behaviours" (Surrey Schools, n.d.). WRAP takes both a prevention approach and an intervention approach, and so while some clients may have been involved in gangs previously, gang involvement is not a requirement. We use *anti-social* to describe the types of behaviours more often associated with, but not necessary for, gang entry such as increased substance use, violence, and sexual exploitation. A 2012 evaluation determined WRAP to be highly effective in reaching its objectives with a predominantly male population (Public Safety Canada, 2012). This evaluation report saw a 67% decrease in negative police contact among participants, and

in one instance, facilitators even stopped the formation of a gang (Public Safety Canada, 2012).

Research Problem

At its inception in 2009, the WRAP population was identified as 84% male and 16% female. In recent years, however, the program has seen a marked 50% increase in female referrals (S. Mackay, personal communication, October 3, 2016). As of 2016, approximately 30% of the WRAP program's participants were female (S. Mackay, personal communication, October 3, 2016). While WRAP has been ultimately successful in reaching its young, predominantly male constituents, girls' experiences of the program have been excluded. WRAP's primary goal of facilitating trusting and positive relationships between youth and their families, school, communities, and peers has proven to help prevent men from joining gangs and to keep young men out of gangs (Public Safety Canada, 2012). However, it remains unclear whether these relational goals and the practices implemented to achieve them facilitate a perception of prosocial connectedness for girls.

Given WRAP's emerging responsiveness to girls, it follows that research should include the girls who are part of the gang prevention wraparound community. WRAP asserts that offering youth opportunities for establishing healthy attachment bonds can enhance prosocial connections that prevent youth from becoming involved in gangs and/or can promote the purposeful withdrawal from antisocial gang affiliations that have already been established (Debicki, 2009). For the present study, *prosocial connectedness* has been employed as a term to describe any relationship that has proven to be positive or helpful and that is intended to promote a positive lifestyle and positive self-worth for youth.

Study Rationale

Some authors (e.g., Bell, 2009; Curry, 1998) advocated for a gender-specific theory to capture the lived experiences of girls and women involved in gangs. Theory-informed interventions are integral to community and counselling psychology practices, and a gender-specific theory may help understand the reasons why girls join gangs. While this is an important part of shaping intervention efforts, we argue that the more urgent need is for knowledge about what factors contribute best to the prevention and intervention of female gang involvement. The field of counselling psychology is known for its strengths-based, collaborative capacity to support clients through a non-linear change process. As schools endeavour to meet the demands of supporting students in their complex developmental trajectories, we also need an analysis that attends both to gender and to the gang context.

Drawing on Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth (Bretherton, 1992) developed a theory of attachment based on the premise that the quality of the child–caregiver connection could either enable or inhibit the healthy social, cognitive, and physical development of a child. Attachment theory is the operating theory that drives the relational goals of WRAP, including prosocial attachment, as observed through increased reports of prosocial connections. More so than for boys, girls report that one of the primary purposes for joining a gang is for its potential to fulfill a role that the family never could—one of love, connection, and purpose (Miller, 2001). It is conceivable, therefore, that replacing this connection outside of a gang context could facilitate exiting a gang.

Gender responsiveness in gang-related programming is essential and must be "rooted in the developmental, psychological, and social characteristics of females" (Totten, 2010, p. 268). Wood and Alleyne (2010) suggested that what is missing from existing research and from theories of gang involvement is the discipline of psychology. Specifically, they argued that "a broadening of discipline involvement will shape and expand knowledge in a way that can only benefit [gang research].… Psychologists need to become more involved in the study of gangs" (p. 101).

The purpose of this study was to learn from WRAP female clients what, according to their perceptions, helped, hindered, and could have helped (or been wished for) in the development of their prosocial connectedness. With WRAP's relational goals in mind, the following research question was developed: "What helped/hindered/would have helped better facilitate your development of prosocial connectedness as a client of the Surrey Wraparound Program?" Findings from school staff informants who were a parallel part of this study can be found in a subsequent publication and will be available from the authors upon request once published.

Research Method

This project met the strict ethical standards of two ethics review boards: the one at the University of British Columbia (BREB) and the one at the Surrey School Board, District #36. The project was funded by the John and Doris Andrews Research and Development Award, Faculty of Education, at the University of British Columbia.

Enhanced Critical Incident Technique

The enhanced critical incident technique (ECIT; Butterfield et al., 2009) is a qualitative research method based on Flanagan's (1954) original critical incident technique (CIT). It is useful when research is interested in learning more about little-understood psychological constructs "that help promote or detract from the effective performance of some activity or the experience of a specific situation or event" (Butterfield et al., 2005, p. 483).

An ECIT study can highlight impactful, influential, redundant, or missing aspects of a program. ECIT generates narrative data but compiles it systematically. The extensive use of quotations helps to provide rich and meaningful contextual information about female WRAP clients' prosocial connectedness.

Participant Selection

This study engaged with four current and four former female participants in the WRAP program. WRAP was exceptional in its willingness to assist in recruiting individuals for interviews. Current and former client participants allowed for varying developmental perspectives of the WRAP program. It is conceivable that those clients who are currently involved versus those clients who are no longer enrolled might report a wider scope of critical incidents based on present as opposed to past experiences. Participants met the inclusion criteria so long as they were female-identified, aged 13 or older, and had been affiliated with the WRAP program for at least 6 weeks, either presently or at some time in the past; 6 weeks was chosen because it was viewed as a reasonable amount of time that would allow participants to report on their experience in the program accurately.

Recruitment of participants took place on-site at the Surrey School District Education Centre with the help of Wrap Team (WT) members. A formal letter outlining the researcher's intentions, describing the researcher and participant roles for the study, and requesting research participation was distributed by WT members to those who met study inclusion criteria. Informed assent was collected from those participants 16 years of age or older, and a parent/guardian signature was obtained for those under 16. All participants were given the option to withdraw from the study at any time and to see a copy of the results upon completion of the study.

Participant Demographics

All participants identified as female. Two clients chose not to respond to the remaining demographic questions. Of the remaining six participants, three were 19 years of age, two were 16, and one was 15. Clients' ethnic/racial identities were self-reported as White (2), Black (1), Sikh/Punjabi (1), Métis (1), and Cree/Coastal Salish (1).

Data Collection

The second author constructed the participant interview guide, and the first author, a graduate student, conducted all participant interviews. Participants were asked to respond to a set of open-ended questions related to their experience making connections in WRAP and how these experiences facilitated, hindered, and/or helped to facilitate their prosocial connectedness. *Prosocial connectedness* describes any relationship that was proven to be positive and/or helpful and was intended to promote a healthy lifestyle and sense of self-worth for youth.

As a way of getting started, participants were also asked to respond to the following question: "In your own words, what would you say are/were the goals of your WRAP team?" Further contextual scaling questions were developed with four of the five WRAP program domains in mind: "On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is not feeling good about your relationship with (peers, school, family, community), 5 is okay, and 10 is feeling very good, where would you place yourself now?" Although connection to oneself is a goal of the program, we determined that what constitutes connection to this domain is idiosyncratic and highly personal. Defining what it means to be connected to oneself is complex, and this domain was not specifically queried in the contextual questions. Responses were intended to provide a subjective ranking for how well connected WRAP clients felt they were to the program domains. The contextual questions were asked to ensure that participants knew they were reporting experiences of prosocial connectedness acquired through the WRAP program and to generate some indication to the program managers about participants' experiences of the program domains and goals.

Next, the first author asked the critical incident interview questions:

1. Can you tell me about a time, since being involved in WRAP, that you experienced a good connection with someone (can be a teacher, staff member, peer, parent/caregiver, and/or someone in your community)?
2. Can you tell me about another time?
3. Can you tell me about a time, since being involved in WRAP, when you felt hindered from feeling connected with someone?
4. Can you tell me about another time?
5. We've talked about what has been helpful and about some things that didn't work so well for you. Are there other things that you wished were a part of this experience that you feel would have helped you connect more with others?

These questions were asked multiple times as participants recalled as many helping, hindering, or wish list incidents as they could during the audio-recorded interview. The second author can provide a copy of the interview guide upon request.

Each interview lasted an average of 1 to 1.5 hours and took place over 2 months. Interviews were conducted during business hours at the Surrey School District Education Centre. All data were kept on a secure device and protected with encryption software to ensure confidentiality. Data were collected using a digital recording device and were transcribed by the first author verbatim before analysis.

Data Analysis

Analysis began with one transcript, and the first author extracted the helping and hindering critical incidents (CIs) and the wish list (WL) items methodically

using the coloured highlighter function in Microsoft Word to identify and locate the CIs within the transcript. After adopting the data analysis procedures from research supervisors, the first author extracted the CIs and WL items from the remaining research transcripts by ensuring that each vignette included (a) the meaning of the event to the participant, (b) the importance of the event to the participants, and (c) whether or not the participant deemed the event as helping, as hindering, or as a WL item.

Those vignettes that met the criteria of having all three components of a CI were sorted into categories based on the degree to which they referred to similar behaviours or experiences and whether their corresponding items were considered helpful, hindering, or "wish list." This data extraction was repeated for each participant transcript. Patterns, themes, and similarities were attended to by adhering to a system of coding that linked simply and strategically each CI and WL item back to its original location in the transcript. An electronic document was used to form tables that correspond to each CI (helpful and hindering) and WL items mentioned in the transcripts.

Each CI, associated category, and proportion of participants (e.g., participation rate) who endorsed them were tracked. Categories were defined to ensure clear demarcation and interpretation and to determine "the level of generality or specificity to be used in reporting the data" (Butterfield et al., 2009, p. 271). Viable categories for reporting were those that were endorsed by at least 25% of participants (Borgen & Amundson, 1984). For CIs and WL items that did not fulfill this requirement, efforts were made to find an alternative category or a new category that encompassed them better.

Trustworthiness and Rigour

The ECIT method has nine credibility checks (Butterfield et al., 2009): (a) audio-recording interviews, (b) interview fidelity protocol, (c) independent extraction, (d) exhaustiveness, (e) participation rates, (f) placing incidents into categories by an independent judge, (g) cross-checking by participants, (h) engaging expert opinions, and (i) theoretical agreement. Credibility checks focusing on interview practices include audio-recording interviews to ensure descriptive validity in qualitative research (Maxwell, 1992), minimizing the possibility for misinterpretation of dialogue by listening to the recordings multiple times, and verbatim transcriptions.

An interview protocol was followed closely to ensure consistency in question order and to promote thoroughness. A protocol promotes an equal opportunity for participants to tell their stories. Following a protocol also avoids the possibility of the interviewer adjusting or asking leading questions based on participant responses. Seven of the eight participants engaged in follow-up cross-checking of their interview transcripts and extracted CIs and WL items to promote the reliability of their accounts. These participants identified no additional changes or

concerns. In total, 25% of the interview transcripts were chosen at random and reviewed by an independent judge who has performed extensive ECIT research. This was done to ensure that the primary researcher followed the interview protocol and that no leading questions were asked. The independent judge reported no concerns or objections.

To demonstrate the exhaustiveness of the emergent category schemes, saturation checks were conducted. These involved initiating categorization of CIs early and checking for new types of incidents while withholding 10% of randomly selected CIs and WL items to check for ease of categorization within an emergent category scheme. The first two saturation checks were conducted throughout the data collection to determine if further interviews were necessary. In this case, CIs and WL items were placed into a category scheme and tracked for exhaustiveness. No new helping or hindering categories emerged after the fourth transcript. One WL item category emerged past the fourth interview, but it contained only one reported CI and therefore was not included as a stand-alone category. The 10% withheld CIs and WL items were easily categorized in the final identified category scheme, indicating that all exhaustiveness checks were achieved according to ECIT standards (Butterfield et al., 2009).

To test the trustworthiness of the emergent category scheme, a master's student trained in the ECIT was recruited to serve as an independent judge and to sort a random selection of 25% of CIs and WL items into the category scheme. A concordance rate of 95% was established, as was an agreement that outstanding items were best recategorized into two different categories. After this change, 100% agreement for the category scheme was achieved with the independent judge, exceeding the 75% concordance rate standard (Woolsey, 1986).

Content and thematic verification from two experts in youth wellness intervention and Wraparound processes was sought out, and the experts were asked to respond to the following questions: (a) Do you find the categories to be useful? (b) Are you surprised by any of the categories? (c) Do you think there is anything missing based on your experience? Expert 1 of the University of Calgary and Expert 2, director of Wraparound and social enterprise initiatives at SKYLARK in Toronto, were recruited for feedback as to the usefulness of the emerging results. For detailed copies of each reviewer's feedback, please contact the primary author of this study.

Findings and Discussion

A total of 97 helping, 24 hindering, and nine WL items were identified. These were organized into 34 categories: 15 helping, 10 hindering, and nine WL items. Table 1 reflects participant responses to scaling questions related to their perceived goal attainment. Tables 2, 3, and 4 display the breakdown of the CIs and the WL items in their respective categories as well as the rate of endorsement (the number

of participants who endorsed the category divided by total number of participants) for each category. Only the top three most endorsed categories will be described in detail in this paper, along with supporting examples from the participants' narratives. For descriptions and matching narratives of the remaining categories, please contact the primary author.

Self-Reported Level of Connection to Four Domains

As stated earlier, the WRAP program's goals focus on facilitating connection to prosocial peers, school, family, community, and oneself. Clients were asked to respond subjectively to contextual questions, asked on a scale of 1 to 10, regarding how strongly connected they felt to each of the first four of these domains. Results demonstrated that the participants felt most connected to their peers (M = 8.7, SD = 1.38), followed by connection to the community (M = 7.6, SD = 3.15), connection to home (M = 7.2, SD = 2.64), and connection to school (M = 6.7, SD = 2.21).

WRAP Team Client Goals

While some of the participants described holding more concrete, measurable goals such as "to graduate high school," others discussed their goals in more holistic, indistinct terms, such as "to better myself" or "to make peace with myself." Results indicate that girls feel very positive about their goal attainment, an average of 8.9 out of 10 (see Table 1). While participants were not required to provide context or evidence for their answers, some did. One participant, for instance, rated her goal attainment as a 9 and added the following:

> Definitely a huge change. I went from not really finding any importance in myself or life or anything really. Not caring about much to being really inspired to do better for myself and for other people just in general, really.

Another participant explained how the accountability from her WRAP leader helped her achieve her goal of attending enough days of class to graduate:

> You wanted to be at school; you wanted to be there because you knew, like, if you missed a certain amount of days, like, they—your principal would notify them and they would talk to you about it and you didn't want them to think you're, like, a bad student or anything so it, like, motivated you to go to school.

Helping Categories

The helping categories are organized in Table 2. While 13 categories met ECIT standards for reporting, only the top three are described with their accompanying vignettes.

Table 1
Self-Reported Goal Attainment

Participant	Goal attainment
S1	9
S2	10
S3	10
S4	8.5
S5	7
S6	10
S7	10
S8	6.5

Notes. Average: 8.9. *SD* = 1.43.

Table 2
Helping Categories

	Category Title	n	Participants	Participation Rate
	Incidents (N = 97)			
1.	Consistency/advocacy	13	7	87%
2.	Support seeking behaviours	7	6	75%
3.	Moments of self-realization/growth	7	6	75%
4.	Connection to community	11	5	62%
5.	Having a role model	8	5	62%
6.	New opportunities	9	4	50%
7.	Non-hierarchical relationships/friendships	9	4	50%
8.	Belief in abilities/feelings of competence	8	4	50%
9.	Staff authenticity	6	4	50%
10.	Connection to peers in the program	5	4	50%
11.	Trust/attachment bond	4	3	37%
12.	Non-judgment/empathy	4	3	37%
13.	Connection to school	3	3	37%
14.	Connection to family/home	2	1	12%
15.	Wraparound approach	1	1	12%

Consistency/Advocacy

With strong ties to attachment theory, this category was endorsed by 87% (*n* = 7) of the participants. Characterized by accounts of the helpful impact of the presence and/or consistency of a staff member, this category reinforces attachment theory's position that caregiver consistency can enhance secure attachment bonds (Eccles & Gootman, 2002); WRAP encourages its staff to mentor the girls, advocating for their success and well-being. Participants described 13 helping incidents of staff members "being there" for them and/or going beyond their professional duties (especially their availability outside working hours) to ensure participant well-being:

> My stages through I guess life. She's [WRAP staff member], like, been there—whenever I needed something she's been there. She's there to help me. I don't even know how to explain all of the love that she's gave [*sic*] me, but I think like more than my parents have ever, so.…

> Like—to know if I'm having, like, a problem—like, I need advice—I'll just call her, and she'll get back to me, like, right away. It's great.… And then, like, I don't know—I've had, like, a very bad point in my life and, like, it was on a weekend and she doesn't work. And she came out to see me so, like, you know that they actually care.

Support Seeking Behaviours

Defined by participant accounts of seeking help as being important for increasing perceptions of prosocial connectedness, this category was endorsed by 75% of the participants (*n* = 6). Examples such as a decision or a willingness to seek counselling or to make a phone call to a staff member when in need of support demonstrate the valuable impact of encouraging support seeking behaviours.

> They've helped me a lot too. Like, there are times like I'd go crying [to WRAP staff] and she's, like, "No, it's going to be okay—you're going to get through this" kind of thing.… She'll tell me strategies and stuff to use and, like, "Oh," like, "there's this you can cope with your feelings, like, there's this way, you know, like, hey, there's—I know you're not taking your meds, but there's, like, ways to cope with it" kind of thing.

Another participant indicated the importance of seeking support: "I find it helpful. It gives me someone to talk to and, like, get everything that's been on my mind that I can't let out."

Moment of Self-Realization/Growth

This category was endorsed by 75% (*n* = 6) of the participants and was characterized by the prosocial impact of taking a new perspective or realizing something about oneself or the world. The accounts demonstrate how trusting connections and introspection helped participants "be themselves." These experiences acted as the impetus for personal growth and for further prosocial connectedness.

> Just, well, the fact that I felt, like, comfortable enough to, like, scream lyrics in the car with people feels great. Cuz, like, you know, normally people just have a barrier. Sometimes you just want to be yourself. And this was one of those moments. It's just you don't even; you don't even realize what you're doing; you're just doing it because it feels good, and then you just get that moment when you realize, like, "Oh, this is awesome."

> And when you're in there and, like, there are other girls that are, like, more lower income and they're not wearing what you're wearing you, like, realize and they talk to you about it, right, like you don't need it—it's just a label—it's not worth anything.… They kind of give, like, a real-life … realism.… And then we do, like, media classes where they show us, like, about fake people and then, like, they actually got a model come in from, like, *America's Top Model*, and they, like, talked to us about, like, how, like, they've changed and what media want us to be.

Hindering Categories

The hindering categories are organized in Table 3. Of the five categories that met the ECIT standards for reporting, three are described with their accompanying vignettes.

Family Delinquency/Toxicity

This category was defined by participant accounts of family or home life as hindering prosocial connectedness. This could include delinquent family members or forms of toxicity in the home such as abuse, arguments, or a lack of role modelling. Half the girls (*n* = 4) described four hindering incidents within this category. For instance, one participant did not hesitate when answering the question of what has hindered her: "I would say my parents. Mostly my mom." In particular, this client described her mother as getting in the way of her managing her issues with anxiety, which has prevented her from making prosocial connections in the past. Another client explained:

> Just this program is, like—I guess, like, kind of like family in a sense; like, I think it's really good that the community has this program and just shows that

Table 3
Hindering Categories

	Category Title	*n*	Participants	Participation Rate
	Incidents (N = 22)			
1.	Family delinquency/toxicity	4	4	50%
2.	Conflict with peers	4	3	37%
3.	Issues with school	3	3	37%
4.	Dysfunctional intimate dating relationships	4	2	25%
5.	Anti-social lifestyle	2	2	25%
6.	Differing goals among affiliates	1	1	12%
7.	Lack of trust/attachment	1	1	12%
8.	Mental health	1	1	12%
9.	Stigma	1	1	12%
10.	Social media	1	1	12%

people are looking out for people who might need that—they don't get that at home or whatever.

[Participant and her mother] don't really have a good relationship. Sometimes, like, she's—I would say because she's from India she doesn't really know about here. So her mind is, like, the Indian way, you know? And then sometimes the stuff she says comes out in a negative way, so it doesn't really go good on me. Cuz I would say I'm a really a sensitive person when it comes to the things my mom says to me. And sometimes the things she says just kind of bring me down.

Conflict With Peers
Participant accounts of the peer–client relationship helped to define this category as problematic to the participants' prosocial connectedness. This was reported as due to peer pressure to engage in delinquent behaviours and/or to conflict with peers as reinforcing a belief that they are undeserving of healthier connections. In total, 37% (*n* = 3) of the participants described four hindering incidents within this category. Client narratives centred on peers as negative influences:

Of course, my friends they always want to party, go out and, like, do some stupid stuff that I don't really want to do. I want to become a CPSA officer, so having a clean record is really important to me and me hanging out with,

like, party people, that, like, you know, those kind of people—it just—it did stop me from reaching my goals, stopped me from where I really want to be.

As another participant reported, "I don't know the people from my first high school. I don't talk to any of them now—they're useless. They didn't do anything good for me.… They just got me into trouble."

Issues With School

This category was defined by participant accounts of participants' relationships with school as being a hindrance to their prosocial connectedness. This could be due to such issues as the type of learning environment, truancy, or expulsion. Over one third of the girls (*n* = 3) described three hindering incidents within this category. For clients, school posed many challenges that caused them to retreat.

I actually wasn't very good at, like—school wasn't a very good factor in my life. Like two years ago, I stopped going to school for, like, a year, a year and a half-ish, and now I just started going, but it's still not going very good for me.… I got into the learning centre now, it involves still, like, more comfortable for me, but I still don't have the motivation to, like, go to school. I'm still skipping and skipping most of the time, even though I miss so much.

I was skipping school a lot too, though, like I was skipping cuz I used to go to [school name redacted] right here, next door actually, and I would skip, like, maybe I would come twice a week, and they'd be like, "Oh, what's happening?" So then again, just distancing, and like, "Nah, I'm not coming" … It made me almost not graduate.

Wish List Categories

Table 4 displays the wish list categories identified by the participants. Only two categories met the 25% standard for reporting.

Greater Financial Resources

This category is defined by participant accounts of participants wishing the program had access to more funding to enhance the client experience. A third of the client participants (*n* = 3) described three WL items within this category. Clients perceived that more money might lead to more resources for girls who were not as lucky as they were to have gone through the program.

Oh, I think definitely, like, finances, because it would be, like, there weren't that many girls in the group, and I know that there are lots of girls that would have benefited from that group. And it must be hard for them to just pick a couple, you know.

Table 4
Wish List Categories

	Category Title	n	Participants	Participation Rate
	Incidents ($n = 8$)			
1.	Greater financial resources	3	2	25%
2.	Greater female outreach/capacity	3	2	25%
3.	Greater community partnerships	1	1	12%
4.	Kids could remain kids	1	1	12%

More money for more girls because, like, so many girls, you go to high school, they have, like, issues and a hard time making friends, right? And honestly, it just makes you, like, a leader and a better person all in one. It just makes you a better person. Before that, I really didn't care about anybody, and, like, it changes you—it honestly does.

Greater Female Outreach/Capacity

This category is defined by participants indicating a desire to reach more girls in the community. This WL item was often furthered by a desire for girls' programming to be taken more seriously. A quarter of client participants described three WL items within this category. Client narratives focused on the degree to which the program helped them reach their goals and insisted that others could benefit from it similarly:

Like, I don't know—some girls that I've met … have no respect and others that I've met are total sweethearts, but all of them still, like, they just need to know themselves. I want them to be able to know who they are and, like, what they're going to achieve in their lives and not just like focus on other people's lives. With all this drama, it's, like, unnecessary … because this program is supposed to bring you happiness and peace with yourself and, like, get you out of doing, like, drugs, or, like, jail or, like, whatever.… I mean, it put me in a better place with myself, with my family. Yeah, I mean, I'm very pleased.

Theoretical Agreement

Youth development programs have been identified as valuable in the literature, but very little is known about what specific program characteristics create the most positive or negative outcomes for youth (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2004). The present study seeks to fill a significant gap in the gang-prevention context.

The consistency/advocacy category resonates with McPartland and Nettles's (1991) definition of *advocacy* as

> a supportive relationship wherein a resourceful adult … provides intensive instrumental, material, and emotional support that can include assessing students' needs for academic and social services, intervening on the students' behalf in schools and other institutions, monitoring students' participation in programs, and identifying and brokering formal services. (p. 569)

Having access to an advocate "effectively increase[s] students' motivation and achievement in school, remove[s] barriers to student progress in school and the wider community, and help[s] students refrain from self-destructive and illegal actions" (McPartland & Nettles, 1991, p. 570).

Further literature supports for the helping categories are as follows: (a) support seeking (Stattin & Kerr, 2000), (b) moments of self-realization/growth (Schwartz et al., 2018), (c) connection to community (Hamel et al., 2010), (d) role models (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2004), (e) non-hierarchical relationships/friendships (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002), (f) staff authenticity (Thomson & Zand, 2010), (g) connection to peers in the program (Sharkey et al., 2011), (h) trust/attachment bonds (Oberle et al., 2014), (i) non-judgment/empathy (Spencer, 2006), (j) connection to school (Tiet et al., 2010), (k) connection to family/home (Sogar, 2017), and (l) wraparound approach (Spergel, 1995). The dominance of relational findings—those rooted in the quality of clients' relationships within the five domains—are further evidence that attachment theory may be a more appropriate theory for program development than social control theory or social disorganization theory more readily taken up in male-centric gang literature and research (Goodwill, 2016).

Implications for Counselling and Wraparound Program Domains

The findings of the present study assist in evaluating the appropriateness of applying a relational/attachment model to inform strategies for gang prevention and intervention in female youth. In keeping with this study's frame of reference—the building of trusting and positive relationships—results indicate that the overall and combined influence of the client–staff relationship (consistency/advocacy, non-hierarchical relationships, staff authenticity, non-judgment/empathy, role modelling) may have profound implications for shifting youth away from anti-social, harmful connections and toward more prosocial, self-affirming ones.

Together, the findings from this study contribute to and advance a comprehensive model for female gang prevention and intervention efforts that sees healthy relationships as antidotes for gang affiliations. Given the findings of the present study, persons involved in positive youth development programs—especially those whose efforts lie in female gang prevention—may want to consider focusing their

attention on providing girls with opportunities to connect with secure attachment figures by way of role models, counsellors, or other program leaders. Facilitating the development of trusting and positive relationships should be considered central to any gender-informed gang strategy.

Taken together, we offer a list of some of the key qualities that could be considered in any positive youth development program interested in supporting the unique needs of gang-involved girls.

1. Offer girls a variety of opportunities to connect with trusting and positive adults in their communities (categories: consistency/advocacy, non-hierarchical relationships, role modelling).
2. Offer girls an environment grounded in the principles of safety and security so that they may feel heard, supported, and free from judgment (categories: staff authenticity, non-judgment/empathy).
3. Encourage links with other prosocial individuals who operate in the same ecological domains as the girls (categories: connection to community, family, school, and peers).
4. Offer girls interesting and unique opportunities to integrate into their communities through experiences such as camping, hiking, sports, art, or gardening (categories: new opportunities, connection to community, wraparound approach).
5. Facilitate girls' self-exploration and encourage support-seeking behaviours through the use of modelling and authentic positive regard (categories: support seeking behaviours and opportunities for self-realization/growth).

Implications for Future Research

This study was limited by gender, age, and school experience. While we did not seek to generalize findings, the aim was to foreground female-identifying student voices. While research on gang prevention and intervention has yet to examine the effects of support seeking specifically on outcomes in girls, one study demonstrated positive outcomes among gang-involved men who reported *receiving* support. Goodwill and Ishiyama (2016), in their CIT study on the facilitation of gang exit among Indigenous male ex-gang members, found that accepting support from family members or partners and accepting guidance and protection in general were highly endorsed categories related to gang exit among this population. While their study represents a different gender population than that of the present study (one third of our participants are, in fact, Indigenous), these findings are curious for two reasons: while they appear to concur with the finding that support from others is a necessary condition for change, there is an important distinction to be made in terms of how the comparison points to potential gender differences.

It is generally accepted that men are less likely to admit the need for help than women. This may hold implications for why the men in Goodwill and Ishiyama's

(2016) study reported receiving support but made no indication of seeking it out. In contrast, the girls in the present study were willing to disclose their active support seeking. Future research may also benefit from exploring the mechanisms by which individuals feel empowered to seek out support actively and receive support and from examining any potential influences that gender and culture may have on these behaviours.

Conclusion

The findings of this study contribute to the limited knowledge base of what features and specific combination of features are responsible for the success or failure of programs seeking to increase prosocial connectedness in female youth. In their narratives, the girls involved in this story shared their endorsement of positive relationships for their capacity to promote prosocial connections to the five domains. Given the findings of the present study, persons involved in positive youth development programs, especially those whose efforts lie in female gang prevention, may want to consider focusing their attention on providing girls with opportunities to connect with secure attachment figures by way of role models, counsellors, or other program leaders. Facilitating the development of trusting and positive relationships should be considered central to any gender-informed gang strategy.

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