Perspectives in the Study of Gangs

There are a number of perspectives and approaches in the sociological study of gangs. The most important are the following:

1. The Sociological approach
2. The anthropological approach
3. The psychological approach
4. The business/economic approach

Allow me to briefly explain each of these approaches.

1. The sociological approach posits that the study of gang behaviour and activities must focus on the social reasons why people join or form gangs. This approach believes that the study of gangs benefits when emphasis is placed on the cultural contexts that cause gangs to form in the first place. As such, this perspective will put emphasis on the following aspects of gang studies: family and how family structure can cause youths to join gangs, the formation of subcultures, the values, norms and beliefs that gang members develop to rationalize why they join gangs, the social organization and the hierarchical roles of gangs, the importance of economic deprivation, lack of employment, poor housing, violence, drug addiction, and child abuse are all emphasized by this approach.

2. The anthropological approach views gang formation as a rite of passage, a ritualistic process that the youth go through as they age. In other words, gang behaviour serves as a bridge between childhood and adolescence. This view posits that in most Western cultures, there is a wide gap between childhood and adolescence. Gang behaviour, they reason, is a means whereby some youths are able to assert their role in society, their masculinity, independence, and non attachment to society. This view also holds that as a rite of passage, youths eventually will grow out of or abandon gang behaviour as they age.

3. The psychological approach argues that gang behaviour is a form of pathological trait; that people who join or form gangs have social maladjustment problems, that they are poorly socialized or have a defective personality. The obvious reference here is to Freudian psychoanalytic theory. This view holds that gang members often lack bondings to the core society, that they cannot be trusted, that somehow they are sick. The impression then is that we can design various therapeutical measures to rehabilitate them.
4. The business or economic approach to gang studies is based on the belief held by academicians that a gang is a social organization that has all the features of any business organization. The idea here is that people choose to join or form gangs because of rational reasons; that they derive financial gains or economic rewards from joining a gang. In this respect, the motive for joining is profit and economic success, same way that a business may seek to maximize its profits. This approach emphasizes the fact that as with any organization, gangs are formed with the following characteristics:

1. leadership structure
2. code of conduct for members
3. definition of a market area and specialization, eg. Drugs, murder for hire, fraud, gun smuggling, etc
4. rules to regulate the conduct of gang members
5. rituals of initiation and recruitment of new members
6. roles and statuses are assigned by the hierarchy to the rank and file
7. a defined territory where the gang conducts its activities
8. a definitive way of identifying the members either through communicative symbols, clothing or apparel, dressing, language, or music
9. loyalty to the group is paramount
10. imposition of internal sanctions or punishments to members who do not follow or obey the gang's rules: discipline and social control enforced to keep wayward members in line

In essence, the economic model proposes that we study gangs as a business enterprise, an enterprise that is run solely for the profit of its members, a sort of corporation, except that in this instance, the focus is on how to use criminal activities to derive profit or financial gains.

Note: Keep in mind that these approaches to the study of gangs interface with each other. In other words, you find that most gangs will have a combination of all these approaches. This means that we should not emphasize one approach to the exclusion of the other approaches. We need to take a broad and holistic perspective, a perspective that informs us that to study gang behaviour, we need to adopt a multi-disciplinary perspective.