

## The Psychology of La Mara Salvatrucha

How can abnormal and social psychology explain the influence of La Mara Salvatrucha in the Northern Triangle?

Psychology

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## Table of Contents

I.	Introduction _____	2
II.	History _____	3-5
III.	The Appeal of Membership _____	5-10
	A. Figure 1 _____	8
IV.	The Mentality _____	10-15
	A. Figure 2 _____	13
	B. Figure 3 _____	13
V.	Conclusion _____	15-16
VI.	References _____	17-18

## Introduction

La Mara Salvatrucha, commonly known as MS-13, has a reputation as one of the most ruthless gangs in the world. The power held by the gang is mostly upheld in the “northern triangle” which include countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (Seelke, 2016). Unlike other organized crime units, the principal goal of MS-13 is not to generate revenue (Dudley & Ávalos, 2018). Instead, the objective is to create a collective identity strengthened by violent criminal activity and social control. As such, it’s difficult to conceptualize the members as anything other than hardened criminals. However, as quoted by psychologist David G. Myers (2011), “Cruelty does not require monstrous characters; all it takes is ordinary people corrupted by an evil situation.” Thus, in order to understand how a human being can become a merciless member of MS-13, one must understand the evil situations in which they were put.

Before considering the historic and economic factors that allowed ---and still allow--- the existence of the gang, human psychology must be examined. Abnormal and social psychology are the prime fields to consider, as these fields explain unusual patterns of behavior and the effects of social interactions on behavior. This begs the question, “How can abnormal and social psychology explain the influence of La Mara Salvatrucha?” These areas of study reveal that the cultural model and identity created by the history, socioeconomic status, and psychology of the gang and its members perpetuate the gang’s existence. This assertion can be understood with knowledge of the gang’s history, the appeal of membership, and the mentality of those indoctrinated. Case studies, research journals, scholarly papers, news and government reports, interviews, and psychology textbooks are used to fulfill this investigation. Scholarly papers and reports are used for historical analysis because they provide better in depth evaluation than

traditional history textbooks, which typically condense information due to their educational and space constraints. Both primary and secondary sources are used for information about the gang. However the case studies, journals, and interviews are relied on most because the first hand perspectives they contain allow for greater psychological analysis. The textbooks and papers aid with this analysis by serving as a reference for psychological theories pertaining to my inquiry. (Miguel Cruz, 2005).

### History

The MS-13 was started by Salvadoran immigrants in Los Angeles in the 1980s (MS13, 2017). These Salvadoran roots were a significant factor in the creation of the gang. Many of the MS-13 creators were refugees from the civil war that erupted in 1979. The entire war is widely known for its brutality and atrocities, but the period between 1978-1983 is marked by the organized campaign of indiscriminate government terror (El Salvador, 2015). This terror, partly executed by death squads, resulted in the highest level of violence against civilians. A 1992 Truth Commission found that 85% of “serious acts of violence” were attributed to the state. Of these acts, 60% pertained to extrajudicial executions, 25% involved disappearances, and 20% involved torture (Truth Commission 1992). This constant pattern of violence explains the exceptionally high number of civilian deaths in the period between 1978-1983. An estimated 42,171 civilians died in this 5 year period, a remarkable number under the context that 50,000 civilians died total in the 13-year long war. (El Salvador, 2015). The mass violence in this period explains why the number of Salvadoran refugees rose to 1.5 million by 1984, indicating there is no coincidence between this surge and the start of MS-13.

The Salvadoran refugees that escaped to Los Angeles formed MS-13 for solidarity (del Barco, 2005). However, they were soon persecuted by territorial Mexican gangs (Hinojosa and Warner, 2017). Upon being faced with this conflict, the gang became violent. This is where the cultural model of violence fomented by the war in El Salvador becomes significant. The immigrants grew up in an environment of constant and brutal violence, as illustrated above. What's more, some of the creating members were soldiers of the guerillas that fought the government. (del Barco, 2005). Ernesto Miranda, a former soldier and founding member of MS-13, explained the impact of this when he said:

In this country, we were taught to kill our own people, no matter if they were from your own blood. If your father was the enemy, you had to kill him. So the training we got during the war in our country served to make us one of the most violent gangs in the United States. (Miranda, 2005)

As such, a combination of knowledge in close combat training and an experience of living in barbaric violence contributed to the cultural model that postulates violence as the medium for resolving a conflict. As is understood through the social learning theory, human reactions are more likely to be aggressive in situations where experience has proved that aggression works (Myers, 2011). And as violence was the mediator in their home country, the immigrants turned to the same medium for protection.

This assertion is supported by the finding of Richard Nisbett and Dov Cohen in 1996. They examined violence among white Americans in southern towns formed by Scots-Irish herders (Myers, 2011). The customs of these settlers valued "manly honor", the use of arms as protection, and they had a past use of slavery. The study found that their descendants have three

times the homicide rates, are more supportive of physical discipline, of warfare initiatives, and unlimited gun ownership than are their white peers in northern towns settled by more traditionally peaceful groups. The findings of this study correlate to the founding of MS-13 in that the cultural use of violence contributed to a tradition of violent norms in both groups. In the case of MS-13, the perpetuation of these cultural norms influence young people to join the gang.

### The Appeal of Membership

The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility laws were signed by Bill Clinton in 1996 (Denvir 2017). These laws made the deportation of undocumented people much easier, subsequently resulting in the mass deportation of MS-13 members. They returned to war-torn, unstable Central American countries whose conditions allowed for the expansion of the gang. These conditions exacerbated the desire of young Central Americans to have an identity, thus pushing them to the most tangible outlet, MS-13.

The MS-13 are most powerful in the “northern triangle” countries of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala (Seelke, 2016). Each of these countries has extensive histories of armed conflict and political repression. Moreover, issues of poverty, inequality, unemployment, and an overall lack of opportunity are ever present in these countries. As reported by the World Bank, 60.9% of Hondurans, 38% of Salvadorans, and 59.3% of Guatemalans live in poverty (The World Bank, 2018). In addition, the poor planning in big cities of Central America allow for the growth of gangs in urban areas due to the lack of recreation space and inadequate social services (Miguel Cruz, 2005). These factors create a prime environment for gang recruitment, as MS-13 thrives in communities where poverty is improperly addressed. Many gang members

come from families where the possibility of education and employment are unlikely. A study done in the Honduran cities of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula found that 80% of the parents of gang members did not have an education past 7th grade and half were unemployed. This creates a responsibility for the children to provide for the family. However, due to the lack of opportunity in their area, they are socially excluded from any possibility of success. As a result, gangs become a career choice, an economic opportunity that provides the security and inclusion that is desired.

Familial relationships can also encourage youth to join a gang. This becomes a factor when relations between family members do not interact in a positive and formative manner for the younger members. This describes families where the caregivers do not dedicate enough time to take care of their youth, either because of disregard or a necessity to work. Through this negligence, the kids are abandoned to the streets without fear of punishment. However, possibly the most powerful factor in this regard is familial relationships built by aggression. These relationships were created by and perpetuate the aforementioned cultural model. In doing so, youth become accustomed to the use of violence in education, correcting, or as a medium to relate to others. In effect, the violence witnessed by gang members in the streets is not exceptionally distinct from the violence experienced in their home. In fact, a 2001 Santacruz and Concha-Eastman study based in San Salvador found that only 16.3% of the surveyed gang members had never experienced corporal punishment in their homes. More than half reported having been witnesses of violent acts committed by a figure of authority to another member of the household. Possibly the most striking finding of this study was that the most definite predicting factor for males joining a gang is to have repeatedly suffered abuse inside the home.

Consequently, many MS-13 members come a home that not only reinforces the violent cultural model but one that maintains frigid personal connections that worsens an adolescent's desire for security.

These economic, social, and familial factors all contribute to the alienation felt by the youth that join MS-13. Maslow's hierarchy of needs illuminates this relationship. This theory maintains that self-actualization is dependent on the consecutive fulfillment of human needs, which are ordered in a five tier hierarchy. Physiological needs must be satisfied before the higher level safety and psychological needs can be addressed (Myers, 2011). For this reason, it is evident why impoverished adolescents join the gang. Impoverishment correlates to food insecurity and unstable housing, problems that are more easily attended to by gang membership than government assistance (Sonterblum, n.d) (Miguel Cruz, 2005). Moreover, their safety needs are neglected. Lack of personal security in their home due to abuse leaves youth at risk to join gangs. Furthermore, adolescents living in areas with a heavy gang presence and violence are more likely to join a gang. Due to the violence that surrounds these youth, the gangs are seen as a means to protect themselves. In addition, as gangs are seen as a career choice, they fulfill safety needs further by providing resources and a form of employment. The following tier, love and belonging, is fulfilled by a gang in that it provides the sense of connection and friendship that is nonexistent in at-risk youths' households. As Figure 1 shows, that the idea that gangs are sources of friendships is more common among younger respondents (13 to 17 year-olds) than among adults (Miguel Cruz, Rosen, Enrique Amaya & Vorobyeva, 2017). This sense of connection extends further in that these youth often lack the resources to properly function in society, as explained above. This form of social exclusion creates feelings of alienation, which create the



low-self esteem that is felt by these youth. It's important to note that evidence suggests that self-perceptions are directly related to how one thinks others think of them. For this reason, individuals with low self-esteem will seek opportunities to heighten their esteem and reputation. The MS-13 is a perfect medium for this goal, as their violent reputation gives members a sense of power and superiority. This is reflected in Figure 1, as minors were found to value respect as a benefit of membership more than their older counterparts (Miguel Cruz et. al). And while Maslow's hierarchy describes the general human desire for inclusion and actualization, the age at which most people join MS-13 is especially significant.

Conditions	None	Friendships	Money & resources	Power	Respect	Freedom	Other reasons
<i>All</i>	27.2	27.7	15.7	14.6	9.2	3.7	1.8
<i>Age</i>							
13 to 17 years-old	19.6	36.4	11.9	17.4	10.9	2.7	1.1
18 to 25 years-old	26.1	26.9	17.7	14.5	9.7	3.8	1.1
26 to 35 years-old	31.7	26.6	15.6	14.4	8.9	3.5	2.3
36 and older	29.1	29.8	13.5	12.1	5.7	5.7	4.3

*Figure 1.* Benefits of being a gang member according to variables. Adapted from “The New Face of Street Gangs: The Gang Phenomenon in El Salvador” by J.M Cruz et. al., 2017.

The average age at which people join MS-13 is 14 (Clavel, 2017). This age falls under the “Adolescence” stage of Erik Erikson’s stages of psychological development (Myers, 2011). This stage is named “Identity vs role confusion”, and it is characterized by the adolescent’s search for an identity. In this period, the teenager attempts to conceptualize their sense of self by testing roles and incorporating them to form a single identity. Inability to do this creates feelings of confusion and disillusionment. Thus, it can be understood why many of the youth who join do so out of feelings of alienation and low self-esteem. Without money, education, social

opportunities, or a safe environment, adolescents do not have the freedom to test out roles. As such, their need for identity surges. This desire all occurs while the teen is undergoing puberty. Puberty starts at 13 in boys, one year behind the average joining age (Myers, 2011). Frontal lobe maturation occurs during this period, allowing for improved judgment, impulse control, and long-term planning. However, younger teens with unfinished frontal lobes are not prepared to sensibly make long-term decisions or resist impulses. This is not to say that teens underestimate the dangers of risky behavior, but that their undeveloped reasoning weighs the benefits heavier. This biological process, the need for identity, and violent cultural model works with the power of conformity to motivate young and disadvantaged teens to join MS-13.

Investigations modeled after Solomon Asch's conformity experiments identified the conditions in which conformity increases (Myers, 2011).

- ❖ One is made to feel incompetent or insecure.
- ❖ The group has at least 3 people.
- ❖ The group is unanimous.
- ❖ One admires the group's status and attractiveness
- ❖ One has made no prior commitment to any response.
- ❖ Others in the group observe one's behavior.
- ❖ One's culture strongly encourages respect for social standards.

Each one of these conditions is applicable to the people who join MS-13. The first can be understood through the previously explained sentiments of disconnection and low self-esteem felt by youths that join the gang. The second is obvious; the UN Office on Drugs and Crime estimate that there are 24,000 MS-13 members across the northern triangle countries (as cited by

Seelke, 2016). Moreover, the gang's presence is felt even more in the impoverished environments of the at-risk adolescents. The poorness and desire for inclusion experienced by this group make the economic opportunities and spirit of unity presented by the gang attractive. Furthermore, this group often does not have equal opportunity for schooling or steady jobs. Without any other permanent commitments, they are more likely to join the gang because nothing restrains them. However, for the group that does have access to school, they are often expelled or drop out upon joining (Miguel Cruz, 2005). As found by the Santacruz and Concha-Eastman study, 75% of surveyed young people in gangs only had education up to 9th grade, the average grade of which people join. What's more, the aforementioned Honduran study found that 92.3% of the interviewed gang members were not in school. Thus, it is evident that school does not qualify as a prior commitment in many cases. As such, prior commitments are not an issue for the people who join. The last two conditions can be examined under the knowledge of the cultural model. As explained, the youth who join grow up in homes and environments where violence is used as a medium for socialization. Under these circumstances, adolescents are encouraged to adhere to this behavior as refusal would lead to ostracization. Correspondingly, the model teaches youth to revere destructive gangs such as MS-13. All of these variables, coupled with the other psychological and socioeconomic factors, prompt adolescents to assimilate to the violent gang culture of their environments.

### The Mentality

The MS-13 is a life-long membership (Cruz et. al., 2017). Strong levels of loyalty and confidence are necessary to uphold a structure such as this. These ingredients are integral to the

united spirit that is maintained by the gang, thus attracting abused youth that are desperate for an identity. However, many members want to leave the gang life as they mature. While a considerable amount are able to, the majority remain in the gang. In order to understand this transition, one must understand the inner workings of the gang, the structures in place to discourage abandonment, and subsequent psychological impact of both factors.

The tight-knit culture of the gang is upheld by codes (MS13, 2017). The following of most of these rules vary by the clique, but the most important are universally followed. All male members are “jumped in”, a ritual in which the joining member is beaten by a group of older members for 13 seconds (Adams and Pizarro, 2009). New members are often then instructed to commit a violent act to prove their membership. In addition, members tend to be tattooed, adorn the colors blue and white, and use hand signs. These traditions and practices unify the members with a common experience and distinct physical symbols. It is this unity that is attractive to prospecting members and new members. An interview of a gang member conducted by Children in Organized Violence summarizes this sentiment best:

What I liked, well I liked to see that everyone was united, that if someone had something and someone said ‘lend me that thing’, they said yes. Everyone lent their things. So that’s what I liked, because they treated each other as brothers and did not fight amongst themselves and that everyone has to be united (as cited by Miguel Cruz, 2005).

With this unity comes the common identity shared by members. This common identity creates the ingroup bias prevalent in the gang. In effect, members feel a strong loyalty to their peers and a distrust of the “outgroup”, or those unaffiliated or in rival gangs (Myers 2011). Due to the cultural model maintained by the gang, this distrust is answered through violent means that

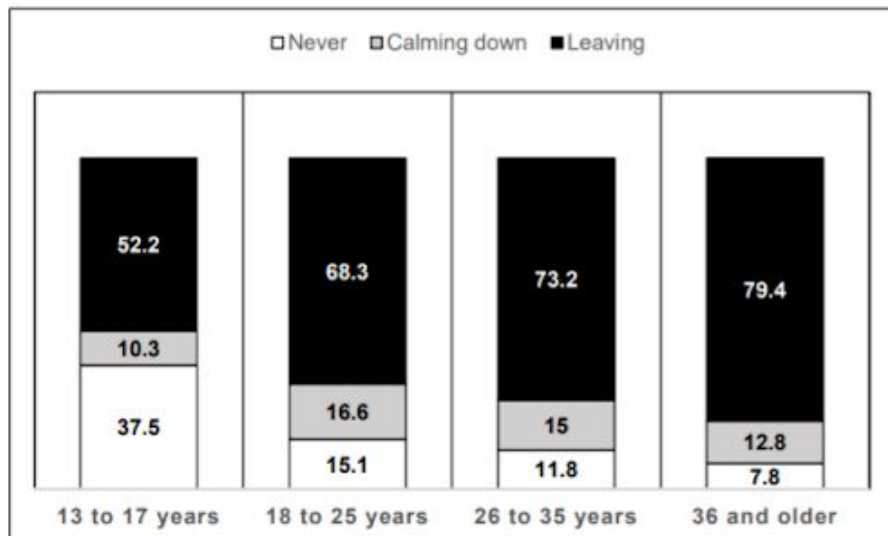
increase the gang's power. However, these acts of violence are not committed under the protection of anonymity that can arise from the formation of ingroups. Membership in MS-13 provides an individual identity in addition to a collective one (Miguel Cruz, 2005). This is because the gang is able to foster a sense of independence and autonomy in areas that social and economic opportunities. In doing so, the self-identity is empowered but merged with the collective identity, resulting in a mechanism that does not promote anonymity but expressions of pride for membership. Under the context of MS-13's culture, this means acts of violence. This assertion is supported by a University of Kent study that found gang members tend to take responsibility for their actions rather than placing blame among their peers (Alleyne and Wood, 2010). At the same time, the study found that gang members were more likely to blame their victims for their actions and use euphemisms to understate their behavior more than non-affiliated youth. This is to say that gang members are motivated to commit crimes due to perceived threats from rival outgroups, but are still recognizant of their role in the said crime. This ownership permeates the powerful identity that is attractive to at-risk prospective members.

Nevertheless, the use of euphemisms is evidence of cognitive dissonance. As expressed, the acts of MS-13 are known for their brutality (MS13, 2017). Naturally, discomfort arises from such acts. In response, members experience cognitive dissonance, and they reduce this discomfort by changing their attitudes (Myers, 2011). Euphemisms are not the only thing that result; an overall attitude that normalizes this violence follows. As such, the cultural model is maintained. Be that as it may, many older members become tired of the brutality. As noted in Figure 2, an overwhelming amount of MS-13 members have considered leaving the gang

(Miguel Cruz et.al., 2017). The reality of this becomes acuter as members age, as seen in Figure 3.

Gang membership	Have you ever thought about calming down or leaving the gang?		
	No, never	Yes, calming down	Yes, leaving
All	16.7	14.7	68.6
MS-13	15.1	7.9	77.0
18 Revolucionarios	10.5	18.0	71.4
18 Sureños	9.1	13.8	77.1
Other gangs	35.6	33.2	31.2
Leadership	3.8	8.5	87.7
Regular member	19.1	15.6	65.3
Collaborator	12.3	14.0	73.7

Figure 2. Intention to leave the gang according to gang organization (in percentages). Adapted from “The New Face of Street Gangs: The Gang Phenomenon in El Salvador” by J.M Cruz et. al., 2017.



*Figure 3.* Intention to leave the gang according to age (in percentages). Adapted from “The New Face of Street Gangs: The Gang Phenomenon in El Salvador” by J.M Cruz et. al., 2017.

This increase in intention to leave by age can be attributed to the maturation of the frontal lobe (Myers, 2011) but also a long-lived experience of the reality of the gang. Leaving the gang can be a long, painful, and uncertain process (Cruz et al, 2017). Members can “calm down”, meaning that they no longer participate in gang activities but are still considered a member of the gang. This option is problematic because those who have calmed often consider themselves removed from the gang, while leaders disagree and call on the former member for participation. Secondly, members can choose to join a church but they are subjected to close surveillance by the gang to ensure that they are true to their new life. Lastly, the individual can speak to leaders directly, but this rarely results in success because the leader does not profit from the member leaving. These factors aren't the largest obstacles to members who want to leave, insecurity is (Clavel, 2017). Many members' lives and families are threatened upon the thought of leaving. Moreover, those who successfully leave face opposition from society, rival gangs, security forces, and employment opportunities. These hindrances increase conformity and obedience among the gang members.

The obstacle of leaving can cause members to feel insecure, a factor that promotes compliance (Myers, 2011). Furthermore, the leaders who threaten members are of high authority and feared reputation, thus increasing the obedience of the members. However, one condition that increases obedience is that there are no role model for defiance. This is not the case for MS-13; one study shows that 81.5% of gang members in El Salvador knew someone who calmed down (Cruz et. al., 2017). Although this is true, it is important to note that having examples of

defiance is not enough to empower members to actually leave. While it may instill the idea, the idea is uncommonly fulfilled due to the aforementioned obstacles. As a result, factors of conformity and obedience contribute to the continued membership of many members.

### Conclusion

Becoming a member of MS-13 is not a simply made decision. This investigation has revealed to me the wide combination of factors leaves youth predisposed to join the gang. The violence of the Northern Triangle countries leaves disadvantaged adolescents at-risk to view the gang as an accepted answer for their struggles. This is understood through the cultural model of these countries that teach violence as a medium for resolution. This model often pervades the homes of at-risk youth, thus leaving them further alienated, discontented, and customized to the violence that surrounds them. This alienation, in combination to the impoverishment experienced by these adolescents, pushes them to seek the MS-13 as a solution. This decision is furthered motivated by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the adolescent's search for identity, the cognitive processes that promote impulsiveness in youth, and conformity. Conformity also works to keep members in the gang, in addition to the powers of obedience and ingroup bias. These psychological factors work in combination with socioeconomic factors to enable the gang to maintain its influence.

While my research was conducted in a scholarly manner, there are still aspects that could affect the evaluation of the information. Firstly, the case studies often varied in their country of investigation. This is due to the fact that its difficult to simultaneously experiment across three countries. As a result, the information derived from these studies were used to make overarching



claims about the Northern Triangle countries, regardless of if the study only reflected one nation. This methodology leaves space for unfair generalization about the situations in each country. Nevertheless, this risk is necessary given the available research, and this method is similarly used by experts on MS-13 in the Northern Triangle. In addition, one study was conducted about local gangs in England. Thus, the conclusions found in this study are not reflective of MS-13 in Central America. For this reason, the conclusions in the British study were only applied if the research about MS-13 strongly suggested connections. A similar issue arose when analyzing data from Central America. Often, MS-13 was one of the many gangs evaluated in a study. Consequently, their data was joined with that of other gangs, meaning that the data was not singularly demonstrative of MS-13. This weakness is not especially alarming, however the push factors remain overwhelmingly similar amongst reasons for gang membership in the Northern Triangle. Notwithstanding, focusing on one specific Northern Triangle country and expanding the research to all local gangs would possibly address these weaknesses in future investigations.

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# EE/RPPF

For use from May/November 2018

Page 1 / 3



International Baccalaureate®  
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Candidate personal code:

## Extended essay - Reflections on planning and progress form

**Candidate:** This form is to be completed by the candidate during the course and completion of their EE. This document records reflections on your planning and progress, and the nature of your discussions with your supervisor. You must undertake three formal reflection sessions with your supervisor: The first formal reflection session should focus on your initial ideas and how you plan to undertake your research; the interim reflection session is once a significant amount of your research has been completed, and the final session will be in the form of a viva voce once you have completed and handed in your EE. This document acts as a record in supporting the authenticity of your work. The three reflections combined must amount to no more than 500 words.

**The completion of this form is a mandatory requirement of the EE for first assessment May 2018. It must be submitted together with the completed EE for assessment under Criterion E.**

**Supervisor:** You must have three reflection sessions with each candidate, one early on in the process, an interim meeting and then the final viva voce. Other check-in sessions are permitted but do not need to be recorded on this sheet. After each reflection session candidates must record their reflections and as the supervisor you must sign and date this form.

### First reflection session

Candidate comments:

I chose the fields of abnormal and social psychology when constructing my question. I deemed these fields to be best because they explain unusual patterns of behavior and the effects of social interactions on behavior. However, I was concerned that not naming the IB psychological sociocultural approach by name would affect the execution of my essay. Mr. Rowe informed me that naming the aforementioned fields would be sufficient enough to cover this approach. We also discussed the phenomenons that I should consider in my essay--- conformity, reciprocal determinism, socialization, etc. This terminology will help in my analysis in the trends that pertain to my question. Mr. Rowe also suggested that I consider the psychology of those who do not join the gang, in addition to the economic and political factors that affect this group. Moreover, he also said that including historical and political factors would contextualize my essay as well. Thus, I will learn a combination of historical documents, clinical studies, and interviews when conducting my research.

Date:

Supervisor initials:

## Interim reflection

Candidate comments:

I was happy to hear that my paper is well-reasoned, but I did receive notes regarding my methodology and conclusion. Now, I know that I have to explain my reasoning for using my chosen sources. I used many studies from Central America due to the fact that the MS-13 is most powerful in this region. However, most of the studies I used were socially scientific rather than psychological. This is because there is not much peer-reviewed, public, and psychological publications on the MS-13, seeing as truly researching the gang carries its own dangers. For this reason, one of my psychological studies is from Great Britain and is not directly about the MS-13, but the information provided was general to gang structures. I will have to appraise this limitation in my conclusion, where I also plan to replace my further questioning with evaluation of my research. More analysis of my sources will improve my methodology and strengthen the investigative nature of my paper.

Date: November 8, 2018

Supervisor initials: A. R.

## Final reflection - Viva voce

Candidate comments:

I chose my topic because of the intriguing lessons of my tenth grade Spanish class. I remember learning about MS-13 and being immediately interested in how history allowed for the gang's creation. Moreover, the gang's loose structure prompted me to question how it is still relevant. Naturally, this pulled me into considering the socioeconomic status and culture of gang-affected communities. In order to best answer this question, I chose psychology so I could understand how these multitudes of factors force individuals into becoming members of MS-13. One challenge in my process, however, was the limited availability of my sources. In addition, some of the data spanned across the Northern Triangle and included other gangs. Subsequently, my research was based on generalized data in some areas. Nonetheless, this limitation does not significantly affect the validity of my data because this is an accepted methodology among the leading social scientists in this field. All in all, I'm grateful that this process has shown me the importance of holistically viewing and addressing this issue.

Date: January 28, 2019

Supervisor initials: A. R.

Supervisor comments:

**Supervisor:** *By submitting this candidate work for assessment, you are taking responsibility for its authenticity. No piece of candidate work should be uploaded/submitted to the e-Coursework system if its authenticity is in doubt or if contradictory comments are added to this form. If your text in the box below raises any doubt on the authenticity of the work, this component will not be assessed.*

Simone was well engaged with the topic and continued to ask good questions about her topic, contextual information, etc. outside of just our allotted meeting times. She offers good reflections as well, especially in her vive voce reflection.