

Social Learning in Context:
Group Homies, Mentorship, and Social Support

by

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ABSTRACT

Social learning theory has enjoyed decades of supportive research and has been applied to a wide range of criminal and deviant behavior. Still eluding criminological theorists, however, is a meaningful understanding of the causal processes underlying social learning. This lack of knowledge is due in part to a relative reluctance to examine value transmission as a process in the contexts of mentorship, role modeling, and social learning. With this empirical gap in mind, the present study seeks to isolate and classify meaningful themes in mentorship through loosely structured interviews with young men on the periphery of the criminal processing system. The purposive sample is drawn from youth in a Southwestern state, living in a state-funded, privately run group home for children of unfit, incarcerated, or deported/undocumented parents. The youth included in the study have recently passed the age of eighteen, and have elected to stay in the group home on a voluntary basis pending the completion of a High School diploma. Further, both the subjects and the researcher participate in a program which imparts mentorship through art projects, free expression, and ongoing, semi-structured exposure to prosocial adults. This study therefore provides a unique opportunity to explore qualitatively social learning concepts through the eyes of troubled youth, and to generate new lines of theory to facilitate the empirical testing of social learning as a process. Implications for future research are discussed.

DEDICATION

A note of appreciation to Elizabeth from the Agency, and Jessica from Free Arts of Arizona, without whom this paper would not have been possible, and to the brave, bright young men I have met through my involvement with Free Arts. This study, like Miss Elizabeth and Jessica, is dedicated to abused children wherever they find themselves.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Social learning theory has enjoyed decades of generally supportive research (Short, 1957; Bandura, 1963; Voss, 1964; Akers, et al., 1979; Andrews, 1980; Matsueda, 1982; Jackson, et al., 1986; Tittle, et al., 1986; Orcutt, 1987; Reinerman and Fagan 1988; Akers, 1990; Alarid, et al., 2000; Erickson, et al., 2000; Pratt and Cullen 2000; Hochstetler, et al., 2002; Ardel and Day, 2002; Hubbard and Pratt, 2002; Unnever, et al., 2003; Pratt, et al. 2004; Chappell and Piquero, 2004; Nofziger and Lee, 2006; Lanza-Kaduce, et al., 2006; Morselli, et al., 2006; Kissner and Pyrooz, 2009; Felson and Lane, 2009; Pratt, et al., 2010). Still eluding theorists, however, is a meaningful understanding of the processes that drive social learning. This is due to the treatment of social learning as an independent variable, and a presumed, unexplained condition. Additionally, a likely mechanism for the transmission of values and identities is mentorship, but criminologists have been slow to empirically examine the phenomenon, perhaps due to the time and resource commitment required by meaningful qualitative study. Nevertheless, it is just this in-depth, personal communication that is needed to inform and expand existing theory, and improve the ways in which we administer assistance to at-risk populations. Indeed, one criminologist has poignantly suggested a need for a new direction in research which “brings criminologists closer to offenders and to the crime event, prioritizes the

organization of knowledge, and produces knowledge that is capable of improving offenders' lives and reducing crime" (Cullen, 2011).

The problem is therefore twofold. First, there has been relative neglect of the modeling component of social learning theory in general (Pratt, et al., 2010). Applying a symbolic interactionist approach to social learning theory, Giordano (2010) points out that "One's associations do not simply provide behavioral models to imitate but, through recurrent interaction and communication, continually impart 'definitions' that are either favorable or unfavorable to the violation of law." This conceptualization implies that the process of social learning is complex by nature, and relies on intricate and evolving interpersonal relationships. More specifically, Giordano suggests that by focusing on simplified, peer-based operationalizations of criminogenic modeling and social learning, researchers may have missed (or mismeasured or misclassified) important effects resulting from role modeling, mentorship, and social learning (p. 29, 2010). While the focus for Giordano (2010) is the gap in the literature with regard to family involvement, the present work addresses the further gap regarding children with no family, or severely impeded family ties.

Second, inattention to social learning as a constantly evolving process of information exchange and value transmission bolsters a myopic view of social learning. Failure to meaningfully understand how people, particularly young people, acquire values and develop behaviors that are both anti- and pro-social compromises the ability of agencies to meaningfully assist children in need of

support, hinders the important work of families to effectively raise their children, and complicates law enforcement's efforts to promote public safety and control crime.

Accordingly, the current work is a qualitative, multiple-case study ($n=3$) examining in-depth interviews with group home residents. The primary goal of the study is to assess the role of mentorship in the process of social learning. The purposive sample is drawn from youth living in a state-funded, privately run group home for children of unfit, incarcerated, or deported/undocumented parents. The youth included in the study have recently passed the age of eighteen, and have elected to stay in the group home on a voluntary basis pending the completion of a High School diploma. The subsequent qualitative analysis is rooted in the theoretical propositions of social learning (i.e. associations will foster behavior patterns, for better or worse), and employ pattern-matching techniques to identify emergent and relevant themes (Saldaña, 2009; Yin, 2009). Responses to prompts regarding who a subject looks up to, who they wish to emulate in life, and how they feel about family, friends, school and church, are assessed for recurring themes, nuanced insight into social learning processes, and how subjects perceive official and overt, as well as informal or indirect iterations of role modeling and mentorship. The broader goal is to produce suggestions regarding future examination of social learning processes to facilitate more meaningful testing of existing theory, and more effective implementation of programming for youth at increased risk for delinquency.

Chapter 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Learning Theory

In early conceptualizations of differential association theory, Sutherland (1939) proposed seven principles underlying social learning as a “tentative theory of criminal behavior” (p. 4). These principles hold that criminal and deviant behaviors are learned by the same mechanisms that drive lawful and conformist behaviors, and that increased exposure to the criminality and deviance of others will increase the criminal behavior and deviance of the individual so exposed. Sutherland suggested this socializing effect is grounded in cultural conflict and social disorganization, and that it results in a series of attitudes (or “definitions”) regarding societal norms, laws, and authority, which provide the platform for continued criminality and deviance. Underscoring the utility of differential association as a general theory of criminal behavior, Sutherland noted that the theory is applicable not just to “hoodlums in slums,” but also to white-collar “professional men” (p.7) in their respective (and stereotypical) types of malfeasance.

Support has been demonstrated for social learning measures across a range of behavior types. For instance, Volkman and Cressey (1954) set forth an early (and colorful) discussion of the treatment of addiction that used differential association-based methodologies, albeit “unwittingly.” Additionally, differential association measures have been used to explain juvenile delinquency (Short,

1957; Voss 1964; Reinerman, 1988); the effects of organized crime on society (Cressey, 1970); marijuana use (Orcutt, 1987; Akers 1999); self-control (Unnever, et al., 2003; Pratt, et al., 2004); police misconduct (Chappell and Piquero, 2004); corporate crime (Piquero, et al., 2005); cigarette smoking (Krohn, et al., 1985; Nofziger and Lee, 2006); college alcohol consumption and sexual activity (Lanza-Kaduce, et al., 2006); the professional enrichment of criminals (Morselli, et al., 2006); and adult sexual offending (Felson, 2009). The presented lists of empirically supported applications of social learning theory are not exhaustive, but clearly demonstrate the strength of the concept across time, measurement, and contextual variations.

Still largely unidentified, however, even after years of study, are the processes by which this transmission of values might take place. Efforts to seek out and to illuminate the implied mechanisms associated with social learning were largely spearheaded by Burgess and Akers (1966) and continued by Akers himself, along with other colleagues (Akers, et al., 1979; Krohn, et al., 1984; Krohn, et al., 1985; Akers, 1990; 1996; 1999; Akers and Lee 1999). The primary contribution made by Burgess and Akers (1966) was to theorize the modern social-psychological concept of reinforcement as a mechanism of social learning. According to Burgess and Akers, their differential association-reinforcement theory is grounded in “the Law of Operant Behavior which says that behavior is a function of its past and current environmental consequences” (p. 135).

Importance of Modeling and Learning as Process

By considering the psychology of learning in the context of differential association and crime, Burgess and Akers specified the importance of behavior and role modeling. Human behaviors are not the product of overt indoctrination of a worldview and a set of rules. They instead develop behaviors by observing what works, in a localized context, to accomplish specific goals. The observation of what works in a specific situation is the essence of behavior and role modeling. There is therefore a need for a more nuanced understanding of behavior and role modeling in the criminological context of social learning and value transmission.

The implication of Burgess and Akers' (1966) work is that role modeling, or imitative behavior patterns, play a part in the social learning *as a process* (see p. 139; see also Bandura and McDonald, 1963; DeFleur and DeFleur, 1967; Erickson, et al., 2000; Bandura, 2001a; Morselli, et al., 2006; Felson and Lane, 2009; Yancey, et al., 2010). The modeling mechanism of behavior and value transmission in the context of a social learning process is relatively uncharted territory for criminology. Giordano (2010) suggests this may be due to the process of social learning occurring so naturally and so intricately, while the measurement of the process is rudimentary. Illustrating this, the author notes that "indeed, evidence favoring modeling/imitation often consists of the observed concordance between parent and child behavior, or considered residual, leftover after such factors as parenting practices have been taken into account" (p. 28).

Some recently published work, which evaluates the effects of variables indicated by social learning theory further illustrate the need for a better understanding of role modeling or mentorship mechanisms. For instance, Brown and Ross (2010a, 2010b) found that “mentorship” was ineffective for many paroled female offenders. The authors attributed this finding primarily to lack of participation by the most delinquent offenders. Importantly, however, they also found that mentorship *was* an effective tool for women who were better personally situated for reform. Similarly, a recent meta-analysis by Pratt et al. (2010) found that while effect sizes for measures of social learning in general were reliably strong, effect sizes for measures of modeling/imitation in particular were “modest at best” (p. 765; also see Morash, 1999, where similar results are reported and discussed). Far from removing modeling from the discussion of social learning, these studies represent evidence of some form of naturally-occurring behavior change, based in personal relationships and interaction, as intrinsic to the well-documented effects of social learning. At the same time, these studies suggest a need for a more specified measurement of social learning variables, and more specialized implementations of mentorship.

Chapter 3

CURRENT FOCUS

The current study attempts to illuminate the role of mentorship in the process of social learning, and to uncover concepts that at-risk youth perceive to be important with regard to the modeling of behavior. Through this sample of group home residents who have technically “aged out” of the system, the research channels the unique point of view of youth living on the periphery of the criminal processing system. It has been suggested that “careful qualitative study of variations across social areas in peer social networks” is a worthwhile direction for future studies of social learning (Reinarman et al., 1988; p. 324). It is here where the present study picks up, in the attempt to further illuminate the social learning process in a particular “social area” by examining mentorship in the context of the group home. In addition to deepening our understanding of group home residents and at-risk youth, the theoretical goal is to develop new directions in the evaluation of social learning by further specifying how social learning might take place. The broader purpose is to reexamine how social learning variables are measured, as an important step toward a more effective understanding of how people view themselves in a social context and learn to behave in prosocial or antisocial ways.

Of particular interest is the effect of positive and negative influences on young people during times of crisis. The term “at-risk youth” is often used to describe young people living in, or exposed to, conditions associated with

delinquency. Children of parents who use drugs or alcohol, (as was the case with Subject I) who emotionally neglect their children, (as with Subject II) or children whose parents are incarcerated or deported (Subject III) are all considered “at-risk” for future deviance and crime. Additionally, children who live in poverty (Agnew, 2005; Dunaway et al., 2000; Hagan, 1992; Hindelang et al., 1981; Jarjoura et al., 2002; Tittle et al., 1990; Wright, et al, 1999), children who have only one parent in the home (Hirshi, 1995; Nye, 1958; Rankin et al., 1994; Shaw et al., 1932), or who have learning disabilities may all be considered “at-risk” as well (Bullis, 2002; Grigorenko, 2006; Hagner, et al., 2008; Leon, et al., 1991; Mishna et al., 2001; Wagner et al., 1992). Certainly, finding and evaluating ways to effectively impart pro-social coping skills, worldviews, and behavior patterns in such children should be a primary focus for criminologists, policy makers, social service providers, teachers, and anyone else engaged in helping kids grow up in healthy ways.

Chapter 4

METHODS

Open-Ended Interviews

A functional component of the present study is the researcher himself (Cresswell, 2007 p. 38; Gelsthorpe, 2007; Maxwell, 2005 p. 37; Rager, 2005; Yin, 2009 p. 68), and the relationship he maintains with the agency responsible for managing and operating the several group homes in which the subjects currently live (Eide et al. 2008). The primary researcher is a thirty four year old Hispanic male, somewhat similar in background to the youth under study. The child of what was then referred to as a “broken home,” the author was spared (for better or worse) the experience of foster care, group homes, or adjudication by a grandfather who was willing and able to care for a fourteen year old troubled youth. On that topic, both Subjects I and III indicated periods in their life where relatives considered, or indeed attempted to care for the subject but ultimately were unable. Subject I was contacted at one point by Jewish grandparents (he was theretofore unaware of his Jewish ancestry), and visited on some occasions, but beyond learning mealtime prayer, was not taken into the family in any meaningful way. Subject III avoided Child Protective Services for years by living with his grandparents, but after his grandfather’s death, and a severe injury to his grandmother’s back, Subject II was placed first in a shelter, and later the group home in which he resided during the time of the interview. Similar to the description set forth by Anderson (1999), the author was raised pro-socially and

in an urban, Midwestern city by a street wise “old head” that had the economic and socially supportive background of a long-time union delegate and auto worker. As a result, the author comes into this study committed to social engagement and acutely attuned to the “code of the street,” a staple in the lives of many of the youths taken into the group homes and, to a lesser extent, governs life at the group home itself.

As a weekly volunteer mentor with Free Arts of Arizona, the author plans and conducts weekly art projects designed to facilitate creativity and freedom of thought at one group home in particular on an ongoing basis. In addition, the author participates regularly in one-day Free Arts events, which cater to several group homes, shelters, and treatment facilities at once or throughout the course of the event. As both participant and observer, the author has attended art camps, theater productions, and mural installations sponsored by Free Arts. The author has also participated in and observed basketball camps, agency-wide Christmas parties, and cultural festivals conducted by the agency in charge of the group homes. The author maintains a generally positive relationship with the population from which the sample is drawn. This “street cred,” combined with a demonstrated ongoing interest in the mentorship of at-risk youth, has fostered a close working relationship between the author and the agency which administers the group homes. This working relationship was indeed critical in facilitating the present study.

Data was collected via a loosely-structured, in-depth interview protocol using open-ended questions (Appendix B). The intention of the protocol was to facilitate the expression of “perceived causal inferences and explanations” (Yin, 2009, p. 102) from the subjects. As such, the focus is not on the factual veracity of responses, but rather insights regarding the perceptions of social learning (especially mentorship) through the eyes of eighteen year old group home residents.

Purposive Sample

With the goal of isolating mentorship in the context of a social learning process in mind, the purposive sample (Auerswald et al., 2004; Maxwell, 2005) is comprised of three young men who turned 18 as a ward of the state, living in the care of a group home. Yin (2009) has suggested that sample selection for case study research should focus on “case(s) that will most likely illuminate... research questions” (p. 26). In following this principle, and working within the boundaries of the agency and an internal review board, a criteria for inclusion (Cresswell, 2007) was established that allowed for broad access to the youth (over the age of eighteen), as well as an initial recruitment pool of five potential subjects. All subjects who met the criteria were invited to participate; three were ultimately interviewed. Although the initial research plan called for five interviews, one potential subject changed his mind and rescinded the voluntary contract to stay in the group home, and another was an “at-will” resident who was ultimately unavailable for interview after several attempts to schedule. While the exclusion

of 40% of the intended sample is a setback in one sense, the circumstances so described are a useful illustration of the reality on the ground. In all, the subjects initially recruited for this study ranged from a dutiful young man (Subject I) who was outwardly happy to assist the group home, the agency, and society in any way he could, to a young man who would not or could not make time for a one hour interview (Intended subject IV) and one who had elected to remove himself from care altogether (Intended Subject V).

While larger sample sizes are generally preferred in research over smaller ones, the scope of the current study is such that insights from a small number of young men are sufficient to open a dialog (Becker, 1966; Maruna, 2007). The importance of case study research has been established in criminology since its earliest days. Famously, *The Jack-Roller* (Shaw, 1930) has done much to inform our modern understanding of delinquency, by rendering visceral details of more abstract “maps and correlations contained in ecological studies” (Becker, 1966). In the spirit of Shaw (1930), the present study works to shed needed qualitative light on the well-established correlation between social learning and behavior noted above.

The subjects of the present study were free to go and live wherever they pleased having reached legal adulthood; they elected to stay in the care of the state, signed a behavioral agreement contract, and continued to live in the group home pending completion of a high school diploma. As such, the sample allows an opportunity to examine social learning and value transmission from the

perspective of young men who have seen some of the worst life has to offer, such as abuse, violence, drugs and alcohol. At the same time, it is likely these subjects have been exposed to more professional programming via various social service agencies than might be received by a child from a family *not* affected by forced removal of children, parental incarceration and deportation, or acute juvenile delinquency.

The group homes in which these young men reside are state funded, but privately run. They are generally clean, orderly, homes in middle-class suburban neighborhoods. The young men attend local schools, and some leave to see relatives (“on pass”) on weekends, as allowed by caseworkers and house staff, pending good behavior. In many ways, the homes are quite similar to any of the other more traditional households in the area. Homework, dinner, and chores are priorities during the week, while occasional group outings (to the park, e.g.) and agency events take place on the weekends.

In the experience of the author, the structure and expectations of the domestic group home life can be burdensome to some residents, whom may range from eight to eighteen years of age and slightly above, and from non-delinquent to extremely delinquent. On the other hand, for some, the stability and support of the group home may be the first prosocial environment in which they have been included. The process of removal from an ostensibly negative environment, mental health and needs assessments at intake, and ongoing programming at the

direction of a caseworker are all aimed at distancing a young resident from a negative or abusive past.

Throughout the group home experience, one is reminded that a group home is different from other homes in some key ways as well. Most importantly, the group homes generally house about ten young people each and are almost always abuzz with someone talking, moving, playing video games, or watching television. Additionally, some of the young men are relatively street-wise, while others are more straight-laced or square. After a year of working with children and young adults in the group home setting, the author has met kids who professed a desire to become big-time drug dealers in Mexico, and kids who were intent on becoming doctors, judges, and professional artists. The group home, then, places children from a range of backgrounds into a single social and physical locale. From a social learning perspective, we may expect to see a proliferation of negative attitudes toward society, authority, and therefore mentorship coming from group home interviewees. Contrarily, from a social support perspective, the increase in exposure to prosocial programs, staff, and caseworkers may contribute to an increased appreciation of mentorship on the part of these older group home residents. The present sample and data collection method therefore allow for a qualitative analysis of “extreme cases” (Cresswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005).

Key Variables

The key variables under study are ***mentorship*** and the ***perceptions*** of the young men regarding the importance of role modeling, social support, and social institutions. The conceptualizations surrounding ***mentorship*** that emerge are a product of the data and based on the author's first and second-cycle analysis (Saldaña, 2009) of responses to interview prompts. For the present purposes, mentorship is conceptualized loosely and generally by the author as any behaviors or relationships observed by interviewees which they deem useful, valuable, or beneficial. Working with the young men individually, discussing topics like family, church, and heroes, allows for a more nuanced understanding of what the subjects see as important to the process of accepting mentorship, and utilizing lessons learned. After all, social workers, correctional staff, and teachers can all model desirable behavior and reward prosocial interaction, but if the intended recipient of these lessons has tuned out the mentor, the method, or the program as a whole, efforts to improve behaviors will likely be in vain.

For this reason, it is important to explore not just *what* young group home residents view as effective, meaningful mentorship (i.e. neighborhood gangsters, church pastors, parents) but also *how* they filter, view, and contextualize the various forms of social learning and mentorship (***perceptions***). For instance, what value does a young man place on family as mentor after coming of age in a group home? Does a young man ostensibly entrenched in moral opposition to legal authority, and the antisocial "definitions" that come with it, necessarily deny

socially supportive assistance from the state? And most importantly, what about the group home experience helped young men come to the conclusion to stay in residence?

Analytic Strategy

The survey instrument allowed the author to collect a range of demographic, background, and circumstantial information, and allowed for the free expression of participants' perceptions. Measures of self-control, deviance, and traditional social learning themes were included in the protocol (see appendix B). Interviews were conducted in the back yard of the respective houses, outside of the group home and away from other residents. This physical separation is seen as a level of freedom from any social or physical restraints of the collective group home environment. The communal style of living intrinsic to a group home is characterized by constant coming and going, necessary intermittent requests, demands, and admonishments from staff, and various other intrusions to pensive thought and private discussion. Furthermore, the lack of reliable privacy in such a setting can only be viewed as a threat to honest responses from the subject of an interview regarding such intimate topics as family, feelings, and aspirations. For these reasons, the interviews were conducted outside the home, but the instrument and interviews themselves attempted to tap into the effects of this environment on the perceptions of the youth regarding various subjects.

In fact, the dire prospect for privacy, coupled with the constant scrutiny of their housemates, is a key characteristic of the sample under study. Such a living

situation necessarily affects the process of social learning. Specifically, the implicit presence of potentially delinquent peers in the home, from a social learning/differential association standpoint, should make prosocial learning less likely and delinquency more likely. From a social support perspective, however, it may well be that children in a state-funded group home are exposed to a higher rate of formalized iterations of social learning compared to children who live with their families, outside of the social care system.

Analysis for the current study was therefore conducted using First Cycle Values Coding (Saldaña, 2009, p. 48) and Second Cycle Pattern Matching based on theoretical rival explanations (Saldaña, 2009; Maxwell, 2005). Although some structural assumptions and predictions were outlined initially, open coding was employed throughout the data collection process to determine and classify emergent themes, consistent with modern qualitative work (Cresswell, 2007; Miles et al., 1994; Yin, 2009). Therefore, concepts that emerged were generated from the data itself, and the resulting analysis focused on placing concepts deemed salient by respondents into meaningful groups. Upon completion of data collection, transcripts were produced and entered into MAXQDA for initial review and organization of the data, as well as some word counts and other preliminary examination. The bulk of analysis, however, was done via the abstract coding of emerging themes in the transcripts as suggested by Madison (2005). As emerging concepts were identified, terms indicative of relevant themes were grouped accordingly. In general, the coding and analysis scheme employed here

borrowed from Martinez (2009). Given the relatively small number of respondents, abstract value coding was sufficient to illuminate emerging themes over the course of the three hours' worth of interview data. This straightforward, qualitative analysis is an effective feature of the present study. Little reliance is placed on computer generated outcomes for the present work.

Chapter 5

RESULTS

Results: Perceptions and Mentorship

What stood out were not the varied backgrounds from which the young men came, but the consistency regarding how they described their perceptions of mentorship and prosocial learning. Simply put, the author posed questions in terms of social learning (e.g. family, peers, attitudes/definitions), and responses came back in terms of social support (e.g. house managers, teachers, and independent living counselors). For instance, when asked the purposefully vague question “who do you look up to?” Subject III responded without hesitation that his current house manager was “like a father” to him. For this respondent, the essence of this father-son relationship generated from the house manager’s willingness to stick with him in troubled times: “...like if I get in trouble or whatever... he has my back on it.” Underscoring the effectiveness of this relationship to curb delinquency for the mentee, Subject III described advice the house manager had given him regarding the younger boys in the home. By taking this advice, and playing more with the older boys, and less with the younger boys, the respondent has apparently learned to get along more successfully in the group home environment. Pointing out that he broke the nose of a fellow resident, and got in other trouble early in his stay at the group home, the respondent relayed how the manager had let him know that “... he has my back but... since I am eighteen I would go to jail and everything, so I have been, like, settling down.”

Subject III's narrative illustrates a recurring theme of **mentor attachment**, in which the respondent is not only exposed to prosocial concepts and values, but internalizes them and endeavors to incorporate them into their lives (Klaw et al., 2003; Sanchez et al., 1999; Stanton-Salazar, 2003; Wasson Barrowclough, 2011). For subject III, this appears to have occurred out of an interpersonal relationship of mutual trust with the manager of the house he was assigned to, *in addition to* the psychological reinforcement of the behavioral success (less trouble) resulting from accepting the trusted mentor's advice (to leave the younger kids alone).

For Subject I, attachment took the form of a relationship with the owners of the agency. This resident is a fixture at agency events. For instance, he recently delivered a written presentation at an agency Christmas Party. At spring event, Subject I read a poem he had written in art camp to a group of dinner theater/fundraiser patrons. Indeed, according to the respondent, his plan for continued residence at the group home after the age of eighteen was inclusive of an informal offer by the owner to allow him to stay for an extra month:

“Basically, how it works is, if I pass every class from here until December, I will graduate in December and then [group home agency], aside from CPS funding my voluntary [term of residence] has offered me a month past my voluntary just to get things in order for the last straw... CPS stops paying in December”

Detailing his relationship with the owner and the owner's wife (both of whom cooperate the agency), Subject I described a conversation they had upon the respondent's placement at the agency:

“...you know Simon gave me long talk when I moved in and said "I don't do this for many kids but I can tell you're gonna be different. A lot of times, I mean, this just isn't a random occasion where I'm volunteering for something like this. I'm a well-known name in Sunshine and do a lot.”

As with Subject I, here we see an attachment to a prosocial force which facilitates prosocial behavior and attitudes. Both subjects display pride in their ability to perform prosocially. For Subject III, his ability to stay out of trouble, and thereby please his house manager is a point of pride. Subject I presents as a young man pleased with his ability and status as a social overachiever. This respondent indicated he was in several ongoing informal mentor-mentee-type relationships with various adults he had met through formalized social support structures. Of note were several female mentors with whom he had developed caring relationships. Among these were the director of the aforementioned group for youth at risk, and an attendance officer at his school, both of whom he refers to as “mom” as well as a third woman he calls his “soccer mom” because she drives him to his mentorship program in a minivan. This fluid concept of attachment complements Burgess and Akers’ (1966) “Law of Operant Behavior”, and adds a needed interactionist component to existing social learning theory (Giordano, 2010).

Results: Social Support

Subject I also indicated that the group home had been effective at instilling and supporting prosocial values and life skills:

“Before I came to this house I had no discipline in my life. And now I budget my money, I, you know, make sure I get stuff done that needs to be done.”

He also pointed out how his participation with a local youth mentorship program for youth at risk had:

“made me... at peace with my past. A lot of times I would act out anger-wise... and I would blame it on the fact that... mom decided to... get high and leave me on the side of the road.”

Through participation in the program, first as recipient and later as provider of mentorship (social support), Subject I appears to have developed a concept of self that reflects both self-worth and responsibility to others:

“I graduated with the [Program Name] 2010 program. In December of 2010... I’m still in contact with my mentor from that program. He is actually taking me to the [arena football] game on Sunday. So, and then I volunteer down there once a month and then I’m part of the youth advisory board for [local mentorship program].”

This finding is supportive of work by Veysey et al., (2009) and others regarding cognitive transformation rooted in social support. For this set of cases, the transformation is born out of social support implemented by child protective services, via mentor-mentee relationships established informally during the process of entering and living in the group home/foster care/CPS system.

Though far less elaborate, Subject II also referenced cognitive transformation as a part of his current self-identity:

Now I think differently; because when I was a kid, I like, thought like a little kid. You know and it's like, when I was little, I was thinking all adults they were telling me... about my mom... that she was right, but I thought that was wrong. But as I grew up, I realize I was wrong, you know, I realize a lot of things.

This narrative segment is illustrative of the cognitive identity transformation described by Giordano: "As children mature... identity itself becomes consequential as a cognitive filter when individuals think about the past, act in the present, and construct future plans" (2010). This finding once again underscores the complexity of the learning process, and supports Cullen's (2011) assertion that life-course theorizations have a secure place in modern considerations of criminology.

A final word on social support in the present sample: Subject II indicated that he had run away from home in Mexico when he was ten years old, and lived on his own in that country for several years. After entering the United States on his own at age fourteen, he lived in a Midwestern state for two years working labor and agriculture jobs. Since placement in the group home as a runaway at age sixteen, Subject II has been a member of a local boxing gym (when asked who he looked up to, he replied succinctly: "Pacquiao and Mayweather"), and has been studying automotive technology at his high school. When asked what he wanted to be when he "grows up", Subject II stated he planned on being a social worker,

a mechanic, or a professional boxer. The subject noted that while boxing was his first pick, the other two were probably more likely. In this life narrative and the stated goals of Subject II, it is possible to see the benefits of social support (particularly organized school/sport activities), on the subject who, after a long period of being essentially devoid of prosocial resources or inclinations, now professes well-thought, socially responsible life goals.

What emerges from this line of interview data is a process in which these young men experience social learning through formal support systems which are implemented by the social service agencies responsible for children not able to live safely with their parents or family. **More specifically, within the formalized regimes of social support aimed at children upon intake into the foster care/group home system, informal relationships develop at the individual level between clients and social workers, teachers, and house staff. These informal mentor-mentee relationships provide the foundation upon which attachment can take place, and the forum in which cognitive transformation is possible.** Beyond the social structure, economic support, and household stability provided by the official implementation of social support for group home and foster kids, the facilitation of these spontaneous, ongoing, prosocial relationships emerges in the present study as a key function of the formal system.

Chapter 6

DISCUSSION

Research Questions

As a broadly-defined group, youth living at increased risk for delinquency represent a central dilemma for current criminology, as they have for generations of social scientists, program administrators, law enforcement agencies, families, and individuals. Indeed, much early work in criminology was focused on individual experiences with crime and delinquency (Conwell et al., 1937; McGill Hughes, 1961; Shaw, 1931; Shaw 1936; Williamson, 1965). During the decades since the heyday of the Chicago School of Sociology, however, research of at-risk youth has increasingly focused on self-report surveys of adolescents and quantitative analysis. While this type of research has “created knowledge, opposed injustice and advanced scholars’ careers...” according to Cullen (2011), it has also “outlived its utility” (p. 287). To address Cullen’s (2011) call to arms, the purpose of the present study was to present points of view of young men as they transition from adolescence to adulthood, to interact meaningfully and personally with respondents, move forward the evolution of criminological theory, and to seek paths toward “improving... lives and reducing crime”.

Based on this study, several conclusions emerge. The first is in regard to how mentorship operates in the context of a group home. For the present sample, mentorship was born out of relationships of formal social support implemented by the state upon intake into the social service system of child care. This finding is

essentially unremarkable given the sample. The second emerging conclusion was more telling, and suggested a process by which formalized advice from a paid employee or volunteer evolves into to a relationship of mutual, prosocial trust. These young men described relationships emerging naturally from a personal attachment with a specific mentor. Each respondent mentioned having at least one informal mentor as a result of participating in some form of socially supportive event or program, but the particular path to a natural mentor was varied. Subject I seemed to find meaningful relationships and mentorship wherever he went, Subject II relayed a more intense, one-on-one relationship with a single house manager, and Subject III maintained an apparently casual, but prosocial mentor-mentee relationship with a former teacher. Here, the current work suggests future studies continue the evaluation of mentor selection by at-risk youth (Cavell et al., 2002; Gastic et al., 2009; Mech et al., 1995; Stanton-Salazar 2003).

The third conclusion which emerges from the present study is that mentorship with meaningful mentee attachment may provide an arena for cognitive growth and identity change. At-risk youth, like their incarcerated adult counterparts, face barriers to prosocial cognitive growth (Hughes, 2009) and the trusting attachment to a prosocial mentor may offer a safe space for mental and emotional expansion. Taken together, these findings therefore suggest that social learning may be better viewed as an outcome of social support, mediated by mentee attachment and cognitive transformation.

Theory

In light of the current study, the author suggests a theoretical reformulation of social learning as the outcome of a process rooted in social support. Qualitative analysis of responses indicates a system wherein iterations of **social support** (generated for the present sample as a result of the formal implementation of ward-of-the-state status) foster an environment in which attachments may form between client and formal programmer. It is within these interpersonal relationships (**mentor attachment**), which are to some extent naturally-occurring, that the youth studied here were able to develop the trusting connection needed for successful transmission of values and resulting **cognitive transformation**. This process-based conceptualization of social learning allows for a more enlightened evaluation of social learning variables, while leaving Sutherland's and Akers' assumptions largely intact. To be sure, the constant cognitive evolution and identity change process described above results in a series of definitions either favorable or unfavorable to violations of the law, as suggested in the earliest formulations of social learning theory. At the same time, Akers' suggestion that operant behavior is at work in the social learning process is as valid as ever. Nevertheless, based on the current study of three group home residents, attempts to measure social learning which fail to properly account for social support and mentor attachment may fail to accurately measure the effect of mentorship, and therefore social learning in general.



According to the theoretical framework indicated above, formal and informal social support fosters mentorship based in personal attachment, and this leads to social learning as an *outcome*. As such, testing of social learning as an *independent* variable has understandably detected some weakness (e.g. the finding by Pratt et al. 2010 that mentorship effects were “modest at best”). In consideration of the present work, measuring social learning as a variable dependent upon social support and relevant mentorship may prove more powerful and more insightful than past evaluations. Further, reconsideration of social learning as an outcome of social support as opposed to an unspecified cause of delinquency may help clarify/specify theory, and better guide both policy and practice.

Implications for Future Research and Policy

Certainly, considering the outcome of this pilot study, future research would do well to compare the qualitative and quantitative social learning outcomes of youth in group homes with those of youth living with their family of origin, particularly with regard to use of and reaction to formal versus informal modes of social learning and social support. As such, future studies should consider the theoretical implications of the current work by comparing group

home residents with children in the general population of the same state. Certainly, if it were found to be the case that group home residents demonstrate and report less delinquency, even given the problematic nature of their home of origin, it would represent a strong argument for the effectiveness of professional, formal social support to decrease delinquency, possibly through formal and/or informal mentorship.

Theoretically, findings that indicated that children who were raised in a group home environment demonstrate more delinquency, based on association with others in the system, would lend support to a more traditional interpretation of social learning. On the other hand, findings that children who were raised in a group home setting demonstrated less delinquency, based on increased exposure to prosocial programming and professionals, would generate support for the emerging conceptualization of social learning set forth in the present work.

There is a broader perspective still to be gained from this examination of group home residents from a social learning/support perspective. Even a child born and raised in the most ostensibly supportive and resource-rich environments will inevitably encounter situations, setbacks, and problems which lend themselves to some level of professional advice or intervention. In addition to group home residents, or children already in the criminal processing system, children living in their home of origin should also be of concern to criminologists, policy makers, and practitioners as a path toward the generation of science that improves the lives of offenders and their families, ultimately “reducing crime”

(Cullen, 2011). The extent to which professional psychological and socially supportive advice and intervention is sought, what conditions and characteristics are correlated with seeking professional assistance, *and why it may be so*, are all valuable questions for future research. Certainly, there are many children who are living in homes of origin which are characterized by abusive and/or violent behaviors, substance abuse issues, and other forms of dysfunction, whom will never receive meaningful intervention, let alone be removed from the negative environment. The unique fate of a group home resident, however, exposes each child to a battery of social, psychological, and specially-trained educational professionals which analyze, engage, and to varying extents, care for the child. Future explorations of the overall effect of this intervention may well change the way we define a child “at-risk”.

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APPENDIX A
INTERNAL REVIEW BOARD EXEMPTION

To: Kevin Wright

From: Mark Roosa, Chair
Soc Beh IRB

Date: 04/04/2012

Committee Action: Exemption Granted

IRB Action Date: 04/04/2012

IRB Protocol #: 1203007858

Study Title: Social Learning in Context: Group Homes, Mentorship, and the Modeling of Roles

The above-referenced protocol is considered exempt after review by the Institutional Review Board pursuant to Federal regulations, 45 CFR Part 46.101(b)(2).

This part of the federal regulations requires that the information be recorded by investigators in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects. It is necessary that the information obtained not be such that if disclosed outside the research, it could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability, or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

You should retain a copy of this letter for your records.

APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

**SOCIAL LEARNING IN CONTEXT:
An Arizona State University Pilot Study**

Interview Protocol

NOTE TO INTERVIEWER:

This interview protocol is designed to put both the subject, as well as the interviewer at ease at the start, and throughout the interview process.

Overformalization, too much direction, and reluctance on the part of the subject should be considered as risks to the effectiveness of the instrument. Keep it light; stay focused; but let the child talk. Do not judge, and ask questions to elicit open-ended answers.

Subject Number

Interview Number

TO BE READ TO SUBJECT:

Hi, and thanks for agreeing to participate in my study. First off, and most importantly, I am gonna ask you a lot of questions, and you are free to NOT answer anything you are not comfortable with. You can end the interview at any time, and you can for sure NOT answer any question, but move on to the next. As long as you feel comfortable, I would like you to feel perfectly free to tell me whatever you'd like to. I will NOT be recording your name, or any other information with this interview information. What we talk about will be locked up and stored securely in my offices at ASU, and again, your name will NOT be stored with the interview data. I am recording our voices, but we will not be discussing names of people or places. If something like that gets mentioned, it will be removed as I type up what was recorded. I have no need for specific names. Your interview will be assigned a subject number, and that will be the only identifying information recorded with your file.

- a) So, I know that was a lot. Before we start, do *you* have any questions for *me*?

Okay then, let's get started. Remember you are free to tell me anything you'd like, or to decline to answer any question you want to. Let me know if you have any questions as we go through this, okay?

- b) Who do you look up to? Why?

c) How old are you?

d) Where are you from?

City? State?

e) How long have you been in group homes/foster care?

FAMILY

f) Tell me a little bit about your family...

g) Mom?

h) Dad?

i) Are they married?

j) Brothers and sisters? Tell me about them...

k) Is family important to you?

l) What are your favorite memories?

m) Any bad memories?

PAROCHIAL

- n) How do you like school?
- o) What do you think of your teachers?
- p) What do you think of your grades?
- q) Do you believe in God?
- r) Do you go to church?
- s) What do you think of FA {Mentorship Program Name}?
- t) How about your FA mentors? What other mentors have you had?

DELINQUENCY

- u) Have you ever been bullied? Tell me about that...
- v) Tell me about your views on drugs...
- w) Tell me about your views on gangs...
- x) Have you ever been in a fist fight?

y) Have you wanted to hurt someone, but stopped yourself? Tell me about that...

z) What about your friends? Drugs? Gangs?

aa) Where do most of your friends live? Old neighborhood?

bb) How many of your schoolmates do you think use drugs?

1. Not many

2. Quite a few

3. Most

4. All

FUTURE

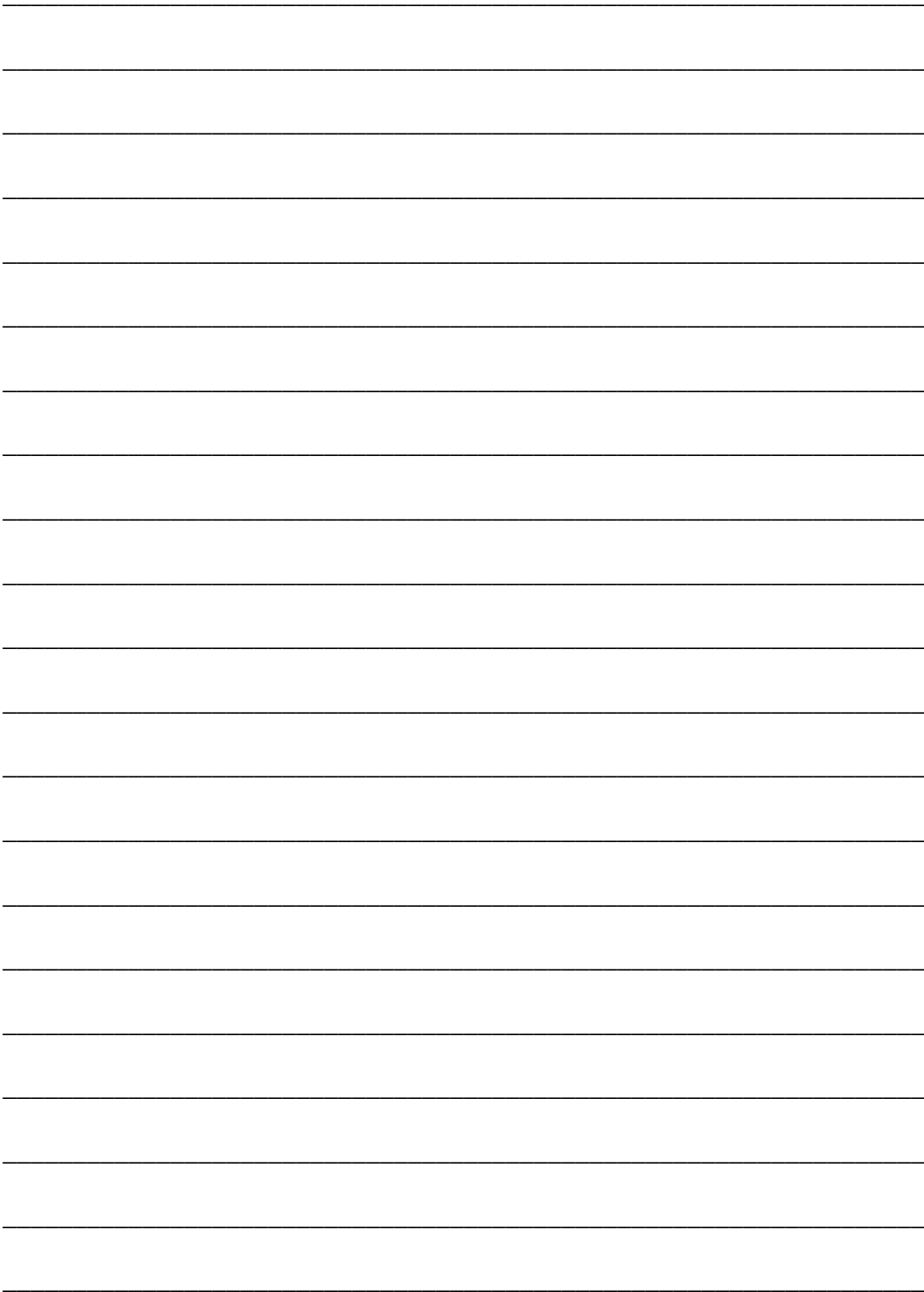
cc) Who do you want to be like when you grow up? Why?

dd) Do you think you will be able to be like them? How?

ee) What are some things you want to accomplish?

ff) What career do you plan on having? Why?

OK, one more question. Why did you decide to stay in the group home?



BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Gabriel T Cesar is a Graduate Research Assistant in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Arizona State University. His research interests include criminological theory, applied law, and the transmission of values within at-risk populations such as troubled youth, immigrant groups, and criminal offenders.