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Social learning and stage development applied to resistance to treatment: Probation youth in a residential treatment facility

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SOCIAL LEARNING AND STAGE DEVELOPMENT APPLIED TO RESISTANCE TO TREATMENT: PROBATION YOUTH IN A RESIDENTIAL TREATMENT FACILITY

A Project
Presented to the Faculty of California State University, San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Social Work

by
Linda Joy Bankowski
June 2003
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ABSTRACT

At the request of Optimist Youth Home's quality management department, a research project was conducted to examine the relationship between serious criminal behavior and length of criminal history, and resistance to treatment of adjudicated youth in a residential treatment facility. A quantitative file review was conducted that involved only using information that was court documented such as types of crimes committed and each youth's length of criminal history. Data was analyzed using a chi-square and cross tabulation table's to examine the association between identified risk factors and youth running away within the first thirty-days of admission. It was hypothesized that youth who committed person crimes or had a long history of criminal behavior would be more likely to run away than those youth that committed property crimes or had a short criminal history. No statistical significance was found between type of crime and running away behavior. However, significance was found between running away behavior and length of criminal history.
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DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to Melba L. Lindberg who had a tremendous positive influence in my life. Without her love and support throughout my teenage years I doubt I would be where I am today. Thank-you for the compassion, understanding, structure and emotional support I so desperately needed at that time in my life.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................ iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ....................................................................................... iv

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Agency Background ................................................................. 1
Problem Statement ................................................................. 4
Purpose of Study ................................................................. 7
Significance of the Project for Social Work ...... 8

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction ................................................................. 12
Theories Guiding Conceptualization .............. 14
Peer Influences ................................................................. 16
Family Influences ................................................................. 22
Summary ................................................................. 28

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Introduction ................................................................. 31
Study Design ................................................................. 31
Sampling ................................................................. 33
Data Collection and Instruments .............. 33
Procedures ................................................................. 35
Protection of Human Subjects .............. 36
Data Analysis ................................................................. 36
Summary ................................................................. 36
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The present study focused on male incarcerated youth, ages ranging from twelve to eighteen, in a twenty-four hour care treatment facility. The study attempted to determine what historical factors such as types of crimes committed, length of criminal history, and gang involvement are behavioral indicators of the type of youth who resist treatment. For the study, run away behavior indicated the youth was resistant to treatment. The theories used to support the study were Bandura’s Social Learning theory and Erikson’s Life Stage Developmental Model.

Agency Background

Optimist Youth Home has a variety of core programs including residential care, mental health programs, foster care and adoption services, expanded high school attendance, after-care services, seven community group homes, vocational opportunities program and an independent living program (Optimist’s Quality Management, 2002). The present study focused on the agency’s residential program, which consisted of five living units. The total population of all units combined was eighty-eight residents. The
ethnic breakdown of the client population at the time the study was conducted was 3.4% Asian, 36.8% African American, 1.3% Caucasian, 43.9% Hispanic, and 1% other (Optimist QM, 2002).

The treatment team at Optimist consisted of psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, child-care workers, and special education instructors. The treatment components included individual therapy, group therapy, with an emphasis on a psycho-dynamic rebuilding and behavior modification of dysfunctional social behavior, multi-family therapy, art and music therapy, a substance abuse program that offered both individual and group sessions, and an on-campus specialized educational school program.

Client referrals came from various departments of Juvenile Probation throughout the State of California. The youth typically referred had a history of school failure and truancy, aggressive behavior, gang affiliation, dysfunctional family dynamics, substance abuse, poor social skills, and possible sexual abuse and/or physical abuse (Optimist, 2002). Typical presenting problems at admission included depression, oppositional behavior/conduct disorder, poor supervision at home,
history of criminal activities, and a history of educational problems (Optimist, 2002).

Referrals were made by the County Juvenile Court system and then assigned to a probation officer who referred the case to the appropriate treatment facility. Once the referral was received, an intake staff at the agency reviewed the court documents, the court and the probation officer’s recommendations, and set a date to interview the youth at a juvenile hall facility.

Some of the deciding factors that determined whether a youth was appropriate were the number of prior treatment facilities at which the youth had been placed and the youth’s length and degree of criminal and mental health history (Optimist, 2002). Once the youth was accepted he was transferred to the facility and assigned to an appropriate unit and a social worker. Within the first two weeks, the school psychologist would conduct a psychological evaluation on the youth. Within the first month of placement, the assigned social worker would complete a diagnostic psychological assessment that included both short and long-term treatment goals. Except for sex offenders who usually completed an eighteen to twenty-four month program, most youth completed a nine to twelve month program (Optimist, 2002).
Problem Statement

For the last three years the agency had become more involved in assessing treatment effectiveness and outcomes in order to better serve their client population. The agency had noticed the majority of youth who run away from their residential treatment program, ran away within the first thirty days of admission. As a result, the agency's quality management department had expressed an interest in conducting a study to identify characteristics of those youth who ran away shortly after admission (Optimist, 2002).

When the study was conducted the agency did not have sufficient staff within their Quality Management Department to review client's case files to determine if there were common characteristics among youth who resisted treatment by running away. The agency had a vested interest in understanding the factors involved and why certain youth resisted treatment, since high numbers of runaways can indicate a possible ineffective initial treatment approach. So the need to understand the problem was extremely important in order to better serve their clients (Optimist QM, 2002).

The study hypothesized youth who had difficulty adjusting to residential treatment can be identified based
on the length of criminal history and the type of crimes committed. A study on juvenile diversion intervention suggested, "client's characteristics, especially arrest history, were more relevant to program outcome than the presence of an intervention" (Campbell & Retzlaff, 2000, p. 71). The study's results suggested the more the youth is engaged in criminal activities, the less possibility the youth will relearn new appropriate behaviors (Campbell & Retzlaff, 2000). According to Bowlby (1988), who emphasizes early childhood development, the initial parental child bond established creates communication patterns that, as the child matures chronologically, resist change. Due to the researcher's ethical and legal restrictions in accessing only case file data, rather than actual interviews with both the youth and their parents, data on early attachment and parental bonding interactions was not analyzed in this study.

A study by Preski and Shelton (2001, p. 202), attempted to establish a link between, maltreatment and outcome of crime seriousness; instead they found "exposure to community violence" as one of the most influential factors in predicting serious criminal behavior. This is not to say maltreatment or child neglect and abuse are not stable predictors of criminal behavior, but in the sample
assessed, community violence was the strongest predictor (Preski & Shelton, 2001). A child’s social environment involves many factors, and those factors, including physical and biological development, family, parenting styles, community, peers, educational system all interact with a child as they develop both physically and cognitively (Fraser, 1996).

From a social learning perspective, children learn through punishment and reinforcement (Bandura, 1976). According to Winfree and Bernat, “reinforcements, whether they are social and symbolic or non-social and physiological, increase the behavior” (1998, p. 2). Regarding the relationship between gang affiliation and delinquency, it was reported by Winfree, Vigil-Backstrom, and Mays, that “in a test of social learning theory and delinquency...variables derived from social theory perform in a far more robust fashion when predicting group-context offending, as opposed to forms of illicit conduct” (1995, p. 9). It appears delinquent behavior is more powerfully reinforced when it occurs in a group context, than when a youth engages in delinquent anti-social behaviors alone (Winfree & Bernat, 1998). Since 50% of the youth who were placed by the courts at Optimist had varying degrees of gang involvement, it is important to understand how and
why these group contexts reinforce antisocial behaviors (Optimist, 2002).

According to White, "self rejection (which results in part from earlier deviance as well as life failures) and negative social sanctions (which result in part from earlier deviance) lead to a disposition to engage in deviance" (1996, p. 3). As a result, "this disposition and the stigma associated with earlier social sanctions lead to a likelihood of association with deviant peers" (p. 3).

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine certain behaviors that are indicative of youth who resist treatment. Criminal history was broken down into property crimes committed, such as residential burglary, vandalism, grand theft auto, and petty theft. Person crimes in contrast consisted of any offenses that involved armed-robbery, drive-by shootings, and assault with intent to cause bodily harm of any kind, including gang initiation. Length of criminal history was recorded in an attempt to establish what evidence could be found between violent crimes and resistance to treatment.

To help identify differences in types of offenders amenable to treatment, data were collected from client
case files for those youth who had been in residential treatment for thirty days or less and have ran away. The operationalized definition for resisting treatment was running away behavior within a thirty-day period.

The design for the study was a quantitative file review. The data were collected from a review of client files. Due to the obvious ethical restrictions in accessing clients who are under the age of eighteen, the youths were not contacted directly. Unfortunately, due to limited information within those case records, certain variables were not tested such as degree of substance abuse, possible child abuse, parental substance abuse, and parental criminal involvement. Therefore, the current study only collected reliable data within the youth’s case files that could be substantiated through court documents.

Significance of the Project for Social Work

The significance of the project for social work was to provide relevant information to help the agency’s intake department better assess their referrals. Additionally it may provide social workers with enough information to identify whether a particular youth at admission is at risk to resist treatment and run away. For example, if statistics indicate youth who commit a violent
crime against a person are more likely to resist treatment than youth who commit a property crime, the social worker could design a specialized treatment approach that would help the at-risk youth adjust more smoothly to treatment.

At Optimist, the social workers’ primary duties are to determine what type of treatment approach should be applied when working with a particular youth. The social worker informs the treatment team of the youth’s individual treatment goals and how these goals will be achieved. These decisions are based on a review of the client’s documented history, court reports, and individual sessions conducted by the social worker with the client within thirty days of admission.

All youth at admission attend a daily group within their respective units conducted by the unit’s treatment staff, consisting of the unit childcare workers, supervisor and social worker. These groups are behavior modification type groups, with an emphasis on a confrontational approach if the youth is not accountable for his behavior. If the social worker can determine which youths, at admission, are at risk to run away, the youth might receive individual sessions instead to establish as much of a therapeutic bond as possible prior to attending
the unit groups. This approach, and others, may help the youth adjust more smoothly to treatment (Optimist, 2002).

The longer a youth stays in treatment, the greater the chances for that youth to relearn new social skills and establish positive relationships with others. As a result of acquiring new skills and relationships their sense of self-esteem and control over their own behavior improves. Once a youth begins to feel good about himself, as a result of positive reinforcement for the desired behavior, he will continue to perform. The longer the treatment, the better, since the more time spent practicing new behaviors, the more likely these behaviors will replace the old dysfunctional ones (Bandura, 1977).

At the time of this study, Optimist already had a unit that dealt with aggressive and gang youth who were very resistant to treatment, and the highest percentage of runaways and plan terminations had come from that particular unit. For example, in the March of 2002, 36% of the runaways came from the aggressive unit, and in April of 2002, runaways increased to 41% (Optimist, 2002). This may indicate that youth who are more criminally sophisticated and aggressive do not respond well to immediate confrontation without first establishing some kind of therapeutic bond.
The findings of the study may provide the agency's clinical team with a place to start in stabilizing new admissions who are at-risk to resist treatment or run away. This initial study may open up the door to taking a closer look at treatment approaches and interventions with this population, while identifying which historical factors may play a part in increasing or decreasing the odds of helping youth complete a successful treatment program. It was hypothesized that youth who engage in criminal activities for three or more years and have committed a person crime will be more likely to resist treatment than those who have two years or less of a criminal history, and have committed only property crimes.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This study used the stage model and social learning theory to explain why certain youth resist treatment (run away within the first thirty-days of treatment). The stage model helps to explain some of the normal behaviors that occur during adolescence and how peer influence under negative circumstances can reinforce deviant behavior in youth. The social learning perspective supports how negative behavior is learned and the reinforcements that are involved in sustaining that behavior.

Some of the primary theories involving juveniles stem from Bandura’s Social Learning Theory and Erikson’s Life Stage Developmental Model (Bandura, 1976; Steinberg, 1996). The social learning model suggests behavior is learned through social reinforcers and non-reinforcers (Bandura, 1976). Erikson’s stage model gives a time frame in which certain basic developmental tasks take place as an individual matures into adulthood (Steinberg, 1996). Both theories hypothesize that certain behaviors are learned and reinforced, and identify the most vulnerable stage for peer influence, adolescence.
According to Erikson (1963), some adolescents experience substantial difficulties when they reach adolescence. They are not only struggling to establish their own identity, in the "identity-versus-role-diffusion stage," they are also exerting their independence by emotionally separating from their parents by "forming and maintaining close relationships" with their peers (Erikson, 1963, p. 7). If a child has encountered difficulties through other stages of development, by the time the child reaches adolescence a dysfunctional pattern has developed (Erikson, 1963).

There are many factors that put a child at risk. Some of the primary factors are "child temperament factors, parental factors, and school related factors" (Kazdin, 1987, p. 62). Assuming the youth has reached adolescence with all the above factors leaning towards dysfunction, the adolescent's peer group "is likely to reflect consistencies in performance and stable characteristics" (p. 39). It is more likely for a youth to adopt those behaviors that prove to be functional and rewarding than those behaviors that do not (Bandura, 1976). Aggression towards others is witnessed by children within their family or community environment and as a result the aggressive acts serve as prompts for those children to
adopt the same behaviors (Bandura, 1976). Fergusson and Lynskey indicate “there is growing evidence to suggest that the nature of peer affiliations in adolescence may play an important role in shaping behavioral directions” (1998, p. 3).

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

This study involved youth age twelve through eighteen. During the adolescent stage youth are attempting to establish their own identity, and exert their independence (Vaillant & Milofsky, 1980). Often, in the course of exerting their independence, youth tend to look to their peers for behavioral references and guidance (Erikson, 1963; Fergusson & Lynskey, 1998). In the case where peer influence involves socially unacceptable behaviors, many youth eventually become involved in the legal and mental health system (Winfree, 2001).

Looking at Erikson’s developmental stage model, children go through developmental stages as they mature to adulthood (Vaillant & Milofsky, 1980). Steinberg (1996) states, “Because the establishment of a healthy sense of identity is so intimately tied to the recognition of the adolescent by those who count in his her life, the adoption of so called negative identity is a sign that
problems in identity development have arisen" (p. 311). A negative identity may involve delinquent behavior and or gang involvement that includes delinquent and antisocial behaviors in a group context. Identity foreclosure could be a "interruption of identity developmental process," and as a result those youth tend to seek out those whose behaviors, in this case negative behaviors, are similar to their own (Steinberg, 1996, p. 311).

Interactional theory according to White (1996), suggest delinquent behavior emerges "from a weakening of bonds to conventional society and form a social environment where deviant behavior is learned and reinforced" (p. 4). White (1996), suggests youth are "equally likely to be influenced to use drugs by their peers as they are to select friends whose behaviors match their own" (p. 6). White (1996), further states "self-rejection and negative social sanctions lead to disposition to engage in deviance. This disposition and the stigma associated with earlier social sanctions lead to a likelihood of association with deviant peers" (p. 3).

Factors such as early positive childhood parental interactions, and healthy environment where the child can get their basic needs met is essential for healthy development (Fraser, 1996). But due to the current study’s
sample restrictions, early childhood factors were not tested. Other studies conducted have found consistent variables such as poor parental attachment, family violence and neglect, unsafe community, negative experiences in school, and negative peer influences to be related to behavioral problems in youth (Winfree & Bernat, 1998; Vivona, 2000). All these variables interact with the child as they emotionally and physically develop (Bandura, 1976).

Peer Influences

In Erikson's stage developmental model, a child grows up in an environment where there is minimal development of trust between parent and child, the child will experience problems mastering the stages that follow (Erikson, 1963: Vaillant & Milofsky, 1980). This would make the child vulnerable to negative peer influences (Steinberg, 1996).

According to Bandura without looking at the child's environment, one cannot attempt to change or prevent the aggressive behavior. Bandura (1976), emphasizes "Individual and small group aggression cannot be analyzed isolated from the social system, which actually generates violence as a defining property of its structure" (1976, p. 5).
Within the current study, developmental history of early childhood to adolescence is assumed to have resulted in dysfunctional factors as the youth has been referred for treatment (Kazdin, 1987). Miskimins (1990), who conducted a study at a similar facility, describes typical presenting problems at admission as including "a history of school failure, aggressive acting-out, family upheaval, over half have been physical abused and/or sexual abused, and poor social skills" (1990, p. 2).

Access to developmental history was not possible in the current study; however based on the available data it was hypothesized that negative social behavior within the developmental period was learned and reinforced by the child's environment (Erikson, 1963; Bandura, 1976). Prior research has identified length of criminal history as a predictor of successful completion of a treatment program (Knight, Logan, & Simpson, 2001).

In a study conducted at a drug treatment program, "significant predictors of treatment completion were identified: educational level, recent arrests, and peer deviance" (Knight, Logan, & Simpson, 2001, p. 16). They discovered clients who stayed in the program and successfully completed the program had "at least a high school diploma, zero arrests within a six month period,"
and peers/friends who were less deviant" (Knight, Logan, & Simpson, 2001, p. 16).

A longitudinal study done by Glueck (1966) revealed that youth who had a shorter history of delinquency or criminal activity prior to placement in a treatment facility were more likely to successfully complete a program than those youth who had a long history of delinquency and criminal activity. The study also revealed youth who displayed continuous serious disciplinary problems while receiving treatment were less likely to successfully complete the program (Glueck, 1966).

According to Kowalski and Caputo (1999, p. 2), typically when a judge decides the disposition of a juvenile offender "factors such as criminal record, evidence of premeditation, extent of violence, damage or loss, impact on victim, and participation with other," are taken into consideration in determining the youth's sentence. Von Hirsch suggests "the likelihood of someone re-offending is influenced more by his history than by the character of his current criminal act" (1991, p. 1).

According to Fraser who takes an ecological perspective that "focuses on social development in the family, school, peer group, and community," aggression is used "to achieve social goals in interpersonal..."
relationships" (1996, p. 1). Aggressive youth, particularly those that commit violent crimes, typically have an extensive history of behavioral problems dating back to early childhood (Fraser, 1996). As a result of a child's dysfunctional environment, the child struggles through early childhood into adolescence having difficulty with both school and peer relationships due to aggressive behavior. Violent behavior is learned, it does not suddenly occur when a child reaches adolescence. Past studies indicate aggressive behavior is learned in early childhood and remains fairly stable throughout childhood and adolescence (Frazer, 1996). The consequences of an aggressive child's behavior are many. Due to aggressive behavior and hostile interactions with both authority figures and peers, they experience limited positive social opportunities with both adults and peers, and as a result, their aggressive behavior escalates (Fraser, 1996).

Curry and Spergel, found differences between Hispanics and Afro-Americans, in gang affiliation. They found, “gang involvement and delinquency among Hispanic youths was closely associated with interpersonal variables [e.g., self-esteem and educational frustrations]" (1992, p. 287). However, with Afro-Americans, Curry and Spergel found “social interpersonal variables [e.g., exposure to
gang members in school and home)” (1992, p. 287). Part of the problem according to Winfree, in reference to Hispanic youth is “these youth are in transition between two cultures” (2001, p. 2).

In a study done by Winfree (2001), in predicting gang membership, peer influence was the strongest predictor of gang involvement, and positive peer reinforcers tended to maintain the behavior. Winfree also found gang members “tended to be older” (2001, p. 8). In the same study, comparing gang members in two different cities with a control group of non-gang members, Winfree found, “non-gang Hispanics perceived there to be many negative punishers associated with gang membership, while Hispanic gang members saw many positive factors associated with gangs” (2001, p. 9).

One theme throughout these studies seems to indicate peer influences as a primary factor in reinforcing and maintaining delinquent behaviors. Winfree (2001) found older youth and deviant peer influences were directly related to gang involvement, which may explain why youth who are older and have a lengthy criminal history are more resistant to treatment. Erikson’s stage model emphasizes the adolescent stage as a time of exerting ones’ independence; and as a result they begin seeking advice
from their peers instead of their parents (Vaillant & Milofsky, 1980). During this stage of development, adolescents who come from a dysfunctional family are even more vulnerable (Steinberg, 1996).

With an emphasis on social learning theory, it appears the youth's peer group continually reinforces gang behavior. "Peer groups provide youths with definitions for and against law violations" (Winfree, 2001, p. 6). According to Arfaniarromo,

The examination of the aforementioned developmental factors and their impact on having delinquent achievement orientation among Latino gang members allows the understanding that what many often perceive as merely a simplistic societal deviance from mainstream on the part of Latino gang members is truly complex. Indeed, this complexity requires the societal acknowledgement of myriad reasons, for orientation towards the achievement of delinquent behavior that many Latino gang members possess is based on a set of norms all their own. (2001, p. 10)

Supported by substantiated research (Curry & Spergel, 1992; Winfree, 2001), it appears youth who have gang backgrounds and/or display antisocial behaviors, tend to seek those like themselves and maintain those behaviors through positive reinforceers that exist within that subculture. When these types of youth are exposed to treatment, they tend to resist (Kazdin, 1987). According to Kazdin, the intervention approach used, depending on
the length of time these behaviors have been reinforced and maintained, "the intervention may need to be particularly strong to exert impact and to overcome other deleterious influences [e.g., extended exposure to poor child rearing, peer influences]" (1987, p. 123).

According to Winfree and Bernat (1998) peer associations act as a strong reinforcer of certain behaviors. These behaviors run on a continuum of socially acceptable to socially unacceptable (Bandura, 1976). In the current study the identified behaviors consisted of antisocial behaviors that bring the youth to the attention of the mental health system and the Juvenile Justice system, such as school truancy resulting in suspension, dysfunctional family environment, gang association resulting in violence, and criminal activities.

Family Influences

All juveniles who were placed at Optimist had a criminal history since they all have been court ordered to a treatment facility (Optimist, 2002). Thirty percent of all placed juveniles had family members who were previously or are presently involved in the legal system due to criminal behaviors (Optimist, 2002). It appears family members, parents and siblings, who are involved in
criminal activities may directly encourage the child to learn the same behavior; as a result the learned behavior is continually reinforced by the family members, and in some cases extended family members (Winfree & Bernat, 1998).

According to LeCapitaine (2001, p. 1), "we must examine the ethnographic, economic, cultural, and other contextual experiences, with which the child is absorbed," to get a better understanding of how to approach the problem. In a study involving "socioeconomic, sub cultural definitions, and violent delinquency," Heimer found, "violent delinquency is a product of learning definitions favorable to violence, which itself is determined directly and indirectly by associations with aggressive peers, socioeconomic status, parenting practices, and prior violent delinquency" (1997, p. 1).

Heimer's study results further indicate parents with "lower economic status tended to use "power assertive discipline that stress obedience and use coercion using poor-assertive discipline strategies," such as "yelling, scolding, threatening, restricting privileges, and punishing children" (1997, p. 5). The "power assertive approach" increases the chance the child will develop an aggressive stance to "solve problems as they develop"
In the case of parents who were at a "higher socioeconomic status," and used "inductive discipline that relies on moral reasoning, there tended to be less aggressive behavior on the part of the child in problem solving" (Heimer, 1997, p. 5). Heimer, indicated "the social-psychological mechanism underlying these relationships is learning generalization, where people acquire values in their jobs and extend them to non-occupational situation, such as disciplining their children" (1997, p. 5). Swinford, Demaris, Cernkovich, and Giordano found "harsher physical punishment in childhood was found to be indirectly but significantly related to increased perpetration via the intervening variables of adolescence and young adult behavior" (2001, p. 1).

Other ecological factors, such as the youth's history of substance abuse or dependence or their exposure to family substance abuse decreases the youth's chances of healthy cognitive development (White, 1996). In the case where the child has been exposed to drugs or alcohol prior to birth, neurological damage may impair the child's ability to control their impulsive behavior (White, 1996). The family environment is the first place social support systems originate (Erikson, 1963). If the family system is faulty or non-existent due to parental drug abuse and
criminal behavior, the child’s sense of appropriate social behavior is distorted (Bandura, 1977).

According to Vivona (2000), children who are neglected and not provided with a secure base from which to explore and develop by their parents will have difficulty establishing relationships with others throughout their lives. This may explain why some children fail to thrive in treatment settings, since often the success of treatment depends on the element of trust established between social worker and client (Steinberg, 1996). Where an appropriate sense of trust has never been developed with the primary caregiver, for example, in the case history of an abused or neglected child, it would seem likely that the adolescent would avoid and reject any effort to establish a therapeutic bond (Steinberg & Cauffman, 1999).

According to Vaillant and Milofsky (1980), the trust versus mistrust developmental stage is probably the most important stage because it establishes a foundation on which the other stages to build. Child and parental attachment appears to be the earliest form of social bonding (Erikson, 1963). The quality of attachment can range anywhere along a continuum from non-existent to an
appropriate attachment that nurtures healthy psychological development (Erickson, 1963).

Erikson (1963) uses the basic trust versus mistrust stage to explain early attachment. This stage involves developing a sense of trust in one’s environment and those that populate it (Erikson, 1963). One of the most significant factors that help an infant to establish the sense of basic trust is the consistency of care provided by the parent (Erikson, 1963). Learning to trust the environment occurs when a baby experiences consistency in their interaction with the physical environment (Erikson, 1963). Thus, mistrust emerges from unpredictability and inconsistency in care-giving as well as in interactions with the environment (Bandura, 1977).

Throughout the literature on juvenile crime and delinquency, reoccurring themes of poor attachment, poor parental style parenting practices, and early educational difficulties that alienate the child from positive social peer interaction exist as possible factors involved in contributing to delinquent antisocial behaviors (Bandura, 1976; Heimer, 1997; McGaha & Leoni, 1995; Rey, Plapp & Denshire, 2000). Fergusson and Lynskey (1998) found “linkages between early conduct problems and later educational outcomes,” and conduct problems “were highly
correlated with early attention difficulties and low IQ” (p. 12). The strongest findings indicated, “children with early conduct difficulties were at a increased risk of juvenile offending, substance abuse behaviors, and mental health problems” (p. 13).

McGaha and Leoni found, “delinquents do come from broken homes significantly more often than do non-delinquents” (1995, p. 2). Glueck’s found youth who committed serious crimes “had been subjected, to a greater extent than others, to abnormal environmental experiences of one sort or another during their childhood” (1966, p. 128). Other significant findings were the differences “between those who persisted in serious crimes and those who became minor offenders...in the disciplinary practices of their mothers” (Glueck, 1966, p. 130). In school conduct, Glueck found those youth who “persisted in serious delinquency misbehaved in school, especially as truants, to a markedly greater extent than did the youth who became minor offenders” (1966, p. 130).

According to Rey, Plapp, and Denshire, “poor family environment has lasting effects in a variety of domains, not just mental disorders” (2000, p. 457). The study found “family environment was associated with later psychosocial functioning,” and where the family environment was
dysfunctional they found “an increased likelihood of admission to a non-psychiatric institution and drug and alcohol abuse” (Rey, Plapp, & Denshire, 2000, p. 457). McGaha and Leoni also found juvenile offenders who were exposed to parental alcohol abuse, family violence and abuse tended to run away and become “substance abusers themselves significantly more than did those from non-alcoholic homes” (1995, p. 7).

It was assumed, based on both Erikson’s Stage Developmental Theory and Bandura’s Social Learning Theory, that youth who are exposed to negative environmental factors, primarily early negative attachment, will experience various degrees of difficulty in dealing with their social environment, resulting in antisocial behaviors that produce aggression towards others. Youth who have had some early healthy attachment and less negative environmental exposure will fare better in navigating their social environment, resulting in a lesser degree of antisocial behaviors such as minor offenses and property crimes (Bandura, 1976; Kazdin, 1987).

Summary

In conclusion, children learn from their environment. They learn what is socially acceptable within the
structures of family, community, school, and peer influences. When a child reaches adolescence, assuming that many of the above structures may have been socially dysfunctional since they are referred for treatment, the youth seeks those peers whose behaviors are similar to their own. In some cases the structures may not be totally dysfunctional, but given other factors such as negative school experiences, which decreases the child’s sense of self-esteem and alienates them from positive peer groups, the child will automatically seek other peers groups that will reinforce their behavior (Winfree, 2001; Curry & Spergel, 1992). The result of the youth’s learned aggressive behavior, length of attachments with other deviant peers, and the degree of negative childhood environmental factors, will ultimately determine the amount of resistance to treatment (Bandura, 1976; Kazdin, 1987). The resistance exists along a continuum from extreme to minimal, and the resistance is determined by the degree of negative encounters the youth has experienced (Bandura, 1976; Kazdin, 1987).

Social workers have an ethical obligation to better understand the environmental structures and how they can negatively impact a child’s healthy development. With a clearer understanding of the problem, social workers can
help these youth transition back into mainstream society with improved social skills and a sense of self-importance to ensure their success.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This study examined the relationship between serious criminal behavior and length of criminal history, and resistance to treatment of adjudicated youth in a residential treatment facility. It was hypothesized that youth who committed person crimes or had a lengthy criminal history would be more likely to run away from treatment than those youth that committed property crime and had a short criminal history. The following sections below include the study design, sampling, data collection, procedures, and data analyses.

Study Design

The purpose of this study was to investigate associations between certain variables recorded for juveniles in a residential treatment setting and their resistance to treatment. The agency, where the study was conducted, found statistical data that indicated 20% of youth run away from placement within the first thirty days of admission.

The design chosen for the study was a quantitative file review. Due to ethical and legal limitations
involving interviewing children under the age of eighteen, the researcher was only able to access case files. The case files used in the study also had unfortunate limitations. These limitations refer to lack of reliability in the information that can be extracted from case files. In order to ensure that reliable information was pulled from the case files, only court documentation was accessed in the study.

The study was based on hypotheses formulated from pre-existing theories and research. These theories indicate certain behaviors are learned through reinforcement, and the longer these behaviors are reinforced the less an individual is open to change (Bowlby, 1988; Campbell & Retzlaff, 2000). It was hypothesized that youth who engage in criminal activities for three years or more and have committed a crime involving intent to cause bodily harm to another individual will be more likely to resist treatment (run away within a thirty day period) than youth who have two years or less criminal history and have committed only property crimes.
Sampling

The study sample consisted of all case files, representing all youth who had ran away from placement within the first thirty-days, between January of 1999, through January of 2002. Files of youth placed due to criminal behavior involving a sex offense were excluded from this study, since many of these offenders had minimal or non-existent criminal histories.

Data Collection and Instruments

The data collected from the case files were: 1) year of admission; 2) age; 3) ethnicity; 4) length of criminal history, operationalized to either two years or less or three years or more; and 5) types of crimes committed, operationalized as either property or person crimes. Level of measurement was nominal except for age. Questions pertaining to demographic information were 1-4 above. The questions 5-6 were the dependent variables used in this study (see Appendix).

**Types of crimes (Dependent variable):** Types of crimes were divided into property crimes and person crimes. For the purposes of this study, person crimes were defined as any crimes that involved physically assaultive behavior towards another human being with intent to cause bodily
harm. Since many juvenile court document files include multiple offenses, or a combination of both property and person crimes, for this study the youth’s criminal history only had to show one charge of a person crime to qualify for the person crime category. If a file indicated no history of any person crimes, then the type of crime category was checked under property crimes only.

**Length of criminal history (Dependent variables):** Since most court reports of youth, who were placed at Optimist, show an average length of criminal history to be between one year to six years, length of criminal history was operationalized to two years or less or three years or more (Optimist, 2002). Deciding factors on length of criminal history was based on prior research conducted by Glueck (1966), whose findings revealed length of criminal history was significantly linked to resistance to treatment.

Due to the researcher’s inability to control for all possible influencing variables, such as prior history of running away behavior, substance abuse, and negative experiences in prior treatment facilities, internal validity was questionable. To limit the threats to internal validity, the questions were carefully designed to represent all of the variables. The data in this study
cannot be generalized to the general population or to any other treatment facility. The information collected from the files can only be representative of the sample involved in this study.

Reliability "is the degree of consistency of a measurement" (Weinbach & Grinnell, 2001, p. 7). The measuring instrument was designed to measure specific types of criminal behavior only within the identified criminal juvenile population at Optimist, not anywhere else. Therefore the reliability of the instrument is relatively stable.

Procedures

Records (files) of youth admitted from January of 1999, through January of 2002 were randomly selected from the agency's client file collection by a Quality Management assistant and given to the researcher. The records were reviewed for information and then recorded using the Data Collection Form created for this study. From every 50 files used in the study, 10 files were pulled out and reviewed by the Quality Management Director to verify the questions and answers were consistent with the researchers answers, thus ensuring inter-rater reliability.
Protection of Human Subjects

Only records were accessed in this study, and each file reviewed was only identifiable by an assigned number code. Individual characteristics of a client cannot be identified. Great care was be taken by all person(s) involved in the study to ensure confidentiality of information and that all files used were kept secure at all times.

Data Analysis

Since all levels of measurement were nominal except for age, a non-parametric statistical test was used. Chi-square test was conducted on type of crimes committed, length of criminal history, and age.

Summary

In conclusion, the study examined a relationship between violent crimes and length of criminal history involving treatment failure with youth. A quantitative file review study design was used, a Data Collection Form was created using only nominal levels of measurement, and the choice of a statistical test was non-parametric.
CHAPTE R FO UR
RESULTS

Introduction

Overall the results of the study indicated no significant associations between crime committed or age in relation to run away behavior in youth. Findings on length of criminal history did indicate some significance in relation to run away behavior.

Presentation of the Findings

Mean age of participants was 16, with ages ranging from 13 to 17. Ethnic breakdown included five categories: Black (n = 36), Hispanic (n = 44), Asian (n = 2), Caucasian (n = 4), and other (n = 2). Total number of case files reviewed was 88. [The categorical variables for length of criminal history were two years or less with a frequency of 37, and three years or more with a frequency of 51. The categories for type of crimes committed were property crimes with a frequency of 38, and person crimes with a frequency of 50].

Due to the fact there were very few files representing three of the ethnic categories (Asian, Caucasian and other), a new ethnic variable was created to represent only Blacks and Hispanics. The ethnic breakdown
in length of criminal history with two years or less was 10 Afro-Americans and 23 Hispanics. For three years or more of criminal history Afro-Americans numbered 26 and Hispanic 23. The data were then analyzed using a chi-square to test the associations between the dependent variables, length of criminal history (two years or less or three years or more) and types of crimes (property or person crimes) with run away behavior within the first thirty-days of admission.

The chi-square statistic failed to detect significant associations among types of crimes committed and running away behavior, but found a significant association between length of criminal history and running away behavior within the first thirty-days after admission ($\chi^2 = 4.902$, df = 1, p = .023). The cross-tabulations revealed, with three years or more of criminal history, Afro-Americans youth exceeded the expected count indicating more Afro-American youth, than Hispanic youth, had a longer criminal history prior to running away.

Summary

In conclusion the first hypothesis, that youth who commit person crimes would be more likely to resist treatment by running away, was not statistically
supported. The second hypothesis, that youth who had three years or more criminal history would be more likely to run away than those youth who had two years or less, did reveal statistical significance.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study examined type of criminal behavior (person crimes) and length of criminal history (three years or more) as possible identifiers of youth who are at a greater risk to resist treatment by running away. Significance was found between running away behavior and length of criminal history. It was also noted that Afro-Americans tended to have a longer criminal history than other ethnic groups presented in this study. Other study findings have indicated that youth who have a long criminal history tend to resist treatment more than those whose criminal history’s were minimal (Bandura, 1977; Glueck, 1966; Kowalski & Caputo). Additionally, recommendations were made for quality management to continue to study this problem area of resistance to treatment by testing other variables that may give them more information to help them stabilize their new admissions.

Discussion

This study did not support the hypothesis that youth who commit person crimes are more likely to resist
treatment by running away than those who commit property crimes within the first thirty-days of admission. However the second hypothesis, that youth who have three years or more of criminal history are more likely to run away from treatment than those youth who have two years or less, was statistically supported. Age did not appear to be a factor in which youth resisted treatment. Steinberg & Cauffman (1999), who conducted a study of whether juveniles should be prosecuted as adults for certain serious offenses stated “Amenability decisions should be made on a case by case basis and should focus on the prior history, rather than chronological age, of the offender” (p. 8).

Limitations

This study was unable to include important variables such as the child’s early development and interactions with parents and outside social entities. Although existing theories support and explain how a child’s environment can produce certain behaviors, it does not give one clear path to follow in trying to change these behaviors other than to try to reverse the social learning process by introducing new social learning skills and positive reinforcement overtime. Time, unfortunately, is not seen as an important aspect of rehabilitation, instead
agencies are expected to change thirteen to seventeen years of negative behavior within a nine to twelve month period. Considering the short treatment allowed by the courts and probation department, it is unlikely that a large percentage of youth will maintain the newly acquired positive behaviors.

The study certainly would have been more informative if a control group was also tested, such as reviewing files of those youth who were in placement for more than six months and were headed towards successful treatment completion. This would have been particularly relevant since it would have either supported or rejected the hypothesis that length of criminal history predicts resistance to treatment.

Another limitation encountered was the file system and access to all files between certain dates. At the time of the data collection Optimist was re-organizing their file system, and as a result many of the files were stored at different buildings making it difficult to ensure all files for certain time frames were included in the collection. Due to the limitations in getting access to all files within a certain designated year, accuracy in the number of youth who ran away within that period was not verifiable. Also, the same limitations interfered with
getting an accurate ethnic representation of those youth who ran away.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

Goodrich and Fullerton (1984) suggest adolescents who reject adult relationships and have relationships with only their peers and are antisocial, are more likely to run away than those youth who are adult oriented, depressed, and withdrawn. According to Fergusson and Lynskey (1998) “numerous studies have suggested that children from moderate risk backgrounds are most likely to show behavioral change” (p. 3). Unfortunately, most referrals the agency receives from probation are youth who have backgrounds that include a long criminal history and multiple prior placements (Optimist QM, 2002). Also a referred youth who has “been exposed to certain types of interventions in the past and who has not responded to them effectively is relatively unlikely to respond to them in the future” (Steinberg & Cauffman, 1999, p. 8). This suggests more attention and focus needs to be on prior history of placements and length of criminal history in considering what youth will respond positively to treatment during intake’s initial interview (Steinberg & Cauffman, 1999).
Assuming that there is power in peer reinforcement, it would seem the relationship between agency staff and youth could play a major role in helping the youth maintain the learned behavior. According to Herrenkohl, Huang, Kosterman, Hawkins, Catalano, and Smith (2001), where a youth’s performance “is rewarded consistently, a bond develops between that individual and that socializing agent. Once developed, the bond has the power to affect behavior independently by creating an informal control on behavior” (p. 47). The control on the behavior therefore “inhibits antisocial behavior through the establishment of a youth’s stake in conforming to the norms and values of a socializing unit” (p. 48). Although clear boundaries must be maintained by unit staff counselors, it appears that along with positive reinforcement for desired behavior, the staff may play a vital part in maintaining that desired behavior overtime (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996).

Within the dynamics of a reinforcing relationship, reinforcement can initially be tangible rewards for desired behavior but as time proceeds the rewards should be primarily social praise with intermittent tangible rewards (Herrenkohl, Huang, Kosterman, Hawkins, Catalano & Smith, 2001). If a youth indicates through his behavior a desire for social interaction with staff, this
relationship should be nurtured since social attention, like peer influence earlier in life, can have a strong effect on maintaining the desired behavior (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996).

According to Fraser (1996) "the development of new service strategies to treat aggressive behavior in childhood and early adolescence is a major national challenge" (p. 2). That challenge still exists today. It is difficult for any treatment facility that works with court placed youth to attempt to change behavior that was learned through numerous interactions within that child's environment prior to entry into the juvenile system. The social learning approach affords the benefits of not having to focus too intently on how the behaviors were created; instead the focus is on what behaviors should be changed (Bandura, 1976; Kazdin, 1987). Unfortunately, treatment facilities such as the agency at which this study was conducted are not realistically given the time needed to ensure those new learned social behaviors are maintained, therefore making their job much harder than necessary.

The staff training at Optimist is quite extensive and the agency ensures that all their staff receives the required training necessary to work with their youth, but
it may be beneficial to the agency to consider conducting more training on adolescent development (Optimist QM, 2002). Having a clear understanding of normal adolescent psychological development gives the childcare worker a better understanding of what is normal adolescent behavior and what is not (Erikson, 1977 & Kazdin, 1987). This would help eliminate unnecessary power struggles between staff and youth over minor infractions that are often just youth exerting their independence (Erikson, 1963).

Conclusion

For the past couple years the agency has developed and implemented a community aftercare program to all youth who leave (Optimist QM, 2002). Aftercare, depending on the relationship developed between client and social worker, is one way to maintain the desired behavior after discharge. Hopefully, this agency will continue to expand and extend their services further in preventative interventions with family and youth prior to placement, and continued their support for those youth who need their help most after discharge.
APPENDIX

QUESTIONNAIRE
DATA COLLECTION FORM

CASE NUMBER:____
TREATMENT FAILURE (RUNAWAY) WITHIN A 30-DAY PERIOD AFTER ADMISSION:

AGE:
1 (13) 2 (14) 3 (15) 4 (16) 5 (17+)

ETHNICITY: (Circle only one)
1 (Caucasian)
2 (Afro-American)
3 (Hispanic)
4 (Asian Pacific)
5 (Other)

LENGTH OF CRIMINAL HISTORY: (Circle only one)
1 (two years or less) 2 (Three years or more)

TYPES OF CRIMES COMMITTED: (Only circle one or other. If the youth has at least one-person crime that involves an assault against another, number (1) must be circled)

1 (Property Crime) 2 (Person Crime)
REFERENCES


