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# Adolescent Males' Similarity, Emotional Safety, and Change in Strengths-Based Programming

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Adolescent Males' Similarity, Emotional Safety, and Change  
in Strengths-Based Programming

by

Wendy Elaine Viola

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

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**Abstract**

In recent decades, the use of strengths-based approaches has become increasingly popular in youth intervention and prevention programs (Maton et al., 2004), which emphasize creating emotionally safe environments through the process of relational community building (Maton, 2000). However, relatively little is known about the relationship between group composition, specifically similarity between group members, and emotional safety and program efficacy. This thesis examines the relationship between adolescent males' similarity to their peers in terms of their demographic profiles and behaviors and belief systems, experiences of emotional safety, and changing behaviors and belief systems in a strengths-based intervention program within Ohio juvenile correctional facilities. Results indicate that in the cases of education-related self-efficacy and the benefits associated with criminal activity, participants significantly changed in the direction opposite of the program's intentions. However, these negative changes were attenuated by differences between participants and their peers in the program. Theoretical implications and potential explanations are discussed.

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## **Introduction**

Media, academics, and advocates generate a great deal of attention regarding the grave dangers of growing up both male and female in our society (Garbarino, 1999; Kandel, Raveis & Davies, 1991; Watts & Borders, 2005). Since the second wave women's movement came to fruition in the 1960s, feminist scholars, fiction writers, educators and social workers have been oriented towards the special developmental needs of girls and young women, and the unique barriers to their healthy development. While a parallel study of young men's developmental needs emerged by the 1970's (Kilmartin, 2007), emerging statistics about boys' declining academic performance relative to girls', the disproportionate number of boys in special education classrooms (US Department of Education, 2005), the prevalence of ADHD among boys (Barkley, 1998), and the highly publicized incidents of male-perpetrated school violence since the 1990s has created a surge of media and academic attention towards boys and young men and the challenges that they face (Garbarino, 1999; Kilmartin, 2007; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003). These piquant stories of male development gone awry have spurred interest in boys' normative development and the ways in which adults can help young men navigate the social and psychological challenges that their sex creates, motivating a boom in scholarly research and commercial guidebooks about supporting boys' developmental transitions to well-adjusted young men.

Advocates for both young men and young women cite depression, suicide, substance abuse, and exposure to violence as risk factors and outcomes that



disproportionately affect their population of interest (Dollette, et al., 2006; Hossfeld & Taormina, 2007; Kandel, Raveis & Davies, 1991). Despite this congruence in negative experiences, the social pressures that contribute to their prevalence among male and female adolescents are different; negative outcomes among young men are often attributed to the encouragement of emotional suppression and rigid guidelines for masculine behavior (Blazina et al., 2005; Good et al., 1995; Kilmartin, 2007), while low levels of self-efficacy and self esteem, poor body image, external loci of control, and low perceived support (Leadbeater, Blatt & Quinlan, 1995) have been blamed for these outcomes among adolescent women. Recognizing the divergent factors that contribute to negative outcomes for young men and women, gender-specific interventions are often used to address the difficulties experienced by men and women in their teens and how each gender's characteristic strengths may be helpful in overcoming them. The following sections include an overview of intervention and prevention programs for youth in general, and some features of programs that specifically serve boys and young men.

### **Intervention/Prevention Programs for Youth**

Intervention and prevention programs in general maintain the goals of enhancing personal and collective well-being by improving environments where people live, learn, and work, and strengthening knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors that promote well-being, stopping problem behavior from ever occurring, and delaying the onset and reducing the impact of problem behavior (Romano & Hage, 2000).

Prevention programs are most successful when their development is theory-driven (Hage et al., 2007). In their evaluation of a strengths-based health promotion program for high school students, Akers and Benner (2008) credit the program's success and ease of implementation to its basis in theoretical models of behavior change, social development, and social learning, which helped facilitators adapt lesson plans and activities for participants' diverse learning styles. The use of values-based programs is motivated by social psychological research on the links between values and behaviors (Neigo et al., 2008), and successful prevention programs often rely on a clear philosophy, or set of principles or values, as guidelines for interpreting and reconciling target attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (Akers & Benner, 2008; Niego et al., 2008). While self-help groups are often intentionally composed of individuals facing similar difficulties (Frost, 1996), homogeneity of program participants is not often cited as a theoretical underpinning of intervention and prevention programs for youth.

Identifying, highlighting, and fortifying participants' strengths is a critical aspect of successful prevention programs (Barker, 2010; Hage et al. 2007), whether or not the program defines itself as strengths-based. For example, one approach to working with groups adolescent men in juvenile detention centers is the Circle of Courage (Soracco, 2010). In the Circle of Courage, the facilitator presents a diagram of different clusters of personality attributes and their strengths, and each participant identifies the cluster with which they identify most closely, helping them understand the dynamics of what drives people who identify with different clusters, and how members of each cluster are valuable to the group. The exercise also helps participants recognize that limitations are

inherent in some strengths, and that successful communities depend upon the contributions of members with diverse and varied strengths (Soracco, 2010).

The Reach for Health (RFH) program epitomizes the practice of involving the community in youth prevention programming. The RFH program, which was designed to supplement existing health education programs, involves placing youth in volunteer positions in community-based health and social service organizations, in addition to classroom-based health instruction that provides participants with the information, skills, and support necessary to reinforce their community service experiences (Akers & Benner, 2008). RFH was implemented in two Brooklyn, NY middle schools over the course of a full school year, during which time 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students spent 3 hours per week in community service placements and attended 30 – 35 classroom sessions (Akers & Benner, 2008). At both 6 month- and 2 year- follow-ups, youth who participated in RFH were less likely to report recent intercourse, sex without a condom or other birth control, or violent behavior, than youth in a control sample (Akers & Benner, 2008). Youth who participated in the strongest intervention, engaging in both community service and the classroom-based curriculum, experienced the strongest gains, and evaluators credit the program's success to the involvement of well-prepared staff, parents, and well-established and well-selected community placement sites (Akers & Benner). Akers and Benner (2008) elaborate:

to reduce the likelihood of risky or antisocial behavior, youths must have opportunities for prosocial involvement (in the family, in school, or in the neighborhood). They then have to get involved in these opportunities ...

If involvement is meaningful and rewarding, youths may form bonds to the pro-social groups that offer the opportunities and share their beliefs.

(p. 7)

In their list of 15 guidelines for developing effective prevention programs, Hage et al. (2007) recommend utilizing culturally relevant practices that are adapted to the specific contexts in which they delivered, and involving the youth and other stakeholders in program development. Within pre-existing programs, allowing adolescent participants to influence the content of each session also increases program effectiveness: when adolescent males were given the opportunity to guide a half-hour private consultation regarding sexual health in a clinic-based intervention, they were significantly more likely to use effective contraception at the 1-year follow-up assessment, their sexual partners were also more likely to use effective contraception, and those participants who remained abstinent reported greater comfort with their decision to do so than a comparable control group (Danielson, Niego & Mince, 2008). Allowing participants in group-based interventions to generate a list of relevant topics that they would like to discuss over the course of the program also generates interest and enthusiasm, and helps ensure that youth have the opportunity to discuss matters that they find most pressing, intriguing, and confusing (Holyoake, 2005).

Prevention program participants' relationships with clinicians, facilitators, and peers within the programs enable them to counter the negative influence of other peers (Reichert et al., 2006), to develop and maintain resilient identities (Barker, 2010; Reichert et al., 2006), and in the case of many gender-specific programs, to learn that feelings of

sadness, disappointment, and fear are normal, good, and masculine, and will not prevent them from being accepted (Pollack, 2006). Prevention programs often emphasize relationships as contexts for adolescents to develop and strengthen the identities that prevention programs attempt to motivate—a young man that begins to see himself as pro-social, respectful, and respectable crystallizes this identity as others acknowledge these aspects of him, a process that occurs within relationships (Reichert et. al., 2006). For example, Peaceful Posse, a Philadelphia-based program intended to reduce youth violence, relies on mentoring, mutual self-help processes, and emotional and verbal expression within secure relationships, to discourage participants from perpetrating violence (Reichert et. al., 2006).

**Intervention/prevention programs for male youth.** Previous evaluations of intervention and prevention programs for adolescent males highlight the importance of several themes in working constructively with this age group: using theory and a clear program philosophy to guide program development (Akers & Benner, 2008; Hage et al., 2007; Niego, Mallari, Park & Mince, 2008), emphasizing participants' strengths (Barker, 2010; Hage et al., 2007; Soracco, 2010), involving as many community members as possible (Akers & Benner, 2008; Niego et al., 2008) allowing participants to guide program content (Danielson, Niego & Mince, 2008; Hage et al., 2007; Holyoake, 2005), adopting a male-friendly style of interaction, involving humor and gradually easing into emotional topics of conversation (Cervantes & Englar-Carlson, 2008; Holyoake, 2005; Kiselica, 2008; Kiselica, 2009; Soracco, 2010), drawing on and encouraging strong relationships (Barker, 2010; Pollack, 2006; Reichert, Stoudt & Kuriloff, 2006), and allowing participants the space to think critically about the program content (Akers & Benner, 2008).

Practitioners and facilitators that work with young men encourage adopting a "male-friendly" style of speech, using activities to ease into conversation, accepting that young men may not want to share right away, joking and sparring, being prepared to tolerate anger and vacillating moods, sitting side by side, honoring and respecting male rites of passage, and disclosing about their own life and background, in order to meet young men inside of their comfort zones (Cervantes & Englar-Carlson, 2008; Holyoake, 2005; Kiselica, 2008; Kiselica, 2009). In working with adolescent non-resident fathers who identify with traditional masculinity, Kiselica (2009) draws on the strengths of

traditional masculinity and the ways in which aspects of the traditional male gender role may be harnessed or recast to support pro-social behavior. For example, Kiselica (2009) recommends asking adolescent fathers to identify what it means to them to be a “good man and father” (p. 22) to encourage greater involvement in their children’s lives. Soracco (2010) attempts to appeal to boys’ energy and attention levels in his work with therapeutic groups in juvenile justice settings, leading participants through a series of increasingly physically and emotionally risky activities before attempting to broach issues of communication, decision-making and problems-solving, social responsibility, and personal responsibility.

The activities, interactions, and relationships that occur within intervention and prevention programs are especially influential to the extent that participants are able to make observations, pose questions, and analyze and contextualize their experiences to make them constructive and productive (Akers & Benner, 2008). Thus, effective programs incorporate time and space for participants to process their experiences, through a variety of mediums and reflection activities that suit their developmental stages and personalities (Akers & Benner, 2008). One such program is The Council, a strengths-based program that has been utilized in juvenile justice agencies, schools, and community organizations throughout the United States, and recently, in two juvenile correctional facilities in Ohio.

### **Strengths-Based Interventions**

In recent decades, strengths-based intervention programs have become increasingly popular, in contrast to more traditional approaches, which often focus on

identifying and addressing weaknesses in individuals, families, and communities (Maton et al., 2004). Strength-based research, policy, and programming, on the other hand, are broadly defined by (1) a recognition and maximizing of individuals', families' and communities' capacities, (2) building new assets within individuals, families, and communities, (3) enhancing the larger social environments in which individuals, families and communities are embedded, and (4) engaging individuals, families, and communities in the processes of designing, implementing, and evaluating interventions (Maton et al., 2004).

For the purposes of designing and implementing strengths-based programming, strengths are considered any and all indicators of positive transactions between a person or group of people and the environment in which they live or work, and which reduce the quality or form of the adversity that they experience (Sandler, Ayers, Suter, Scultz, & Twohey-Jacobs, 2004). Strengths are defined by their plasticity; they may be nurtured, supported, and sustained by policy and programming (Sandler et al., 2004). Strengths are considered protective in that they fulfill individuals' needs for safety and biological integrity, control over their environment, positive and supportive relationships, and belief in their self-worth, which enables resilience, the ability to positively adapt and thrive under conditions of adversity (Sandler et al., 2004). Resilience is considered multidimensional and context-based, in that resilience in one domain does not necessarily translate into resilience in other contexts or with regard to other aspects of a person's experience (Leadbeater et al., 2004). Programs' ability to promote resilience is often constrained by prevailing aspects of the environments where they are implemented and as



a result, the success of strengths-based programs is often indicated by the level of change in the environments in which they function (Maton, 2000).

Among the goals of strengths-based programming are interrupting or reversing downward developmental trajectories, diminishing the causes or impacts of stressful situations, breaking cycles of negative interactions between individuals and family or school situations, promoting the development and maintenance of self-efficacy, creating beliefs and convictions counter to deviant behaviors, and providing opportunities for positive education, vocational training, and personal growth (Leadbeater, Schellenbach, Maton & Dodgen, 2004).

**Relational community building.** Relational community building is a foundational component of strengths-based programming (Maton, 2000). Relational community building is a process that aims to foster and sustain the interpersonal aspects of a setting (Maton, 2000), developing the relationships and resources necessary for a program participant to substantially increase their control over their life and environment (Maton, 2008). Gusfield (1975) defines relational communities in terms of the quality of the character of human relationships within a social context, distinct from the physical aspects of the setting. The goal of relational community building is to encourage personal and intergroup relationships within target environments, such that the environments themselves contribute to positive socio-emotional and behavioral outcomes by embodying connectedness, inclusiveness, support, and belonging (Maton, 2000). Environments in which successful relational community building has occurred are

characterized by encompassing support systems, caring relationships, and a sense of community (Maton, 2008).

Relational community building is a facet of all strengths-based programs, regardless of the interventions' target phenomena (Maton, 2000). Across strengths-based programs, relational community building contributes to participants' empowerment through facilitating the psychological processes of caring, support, and belonging (Maton, 2008). Tseng and Seidman (2007) argue that the functionality of all such settings rests on the social processes that occur therein. Participation in meaningful relationships, and opportunities for social and emotional learning and identity development in the context of those relationships, are the most important factors in determining program outcomes (Tseng & Seidman, 2007). Relational communities ease the challenges and stress encountered during the process of attaining greater control over one's life, which is the goal of many community-based strengths-based programs (Maton & Salem, 1995).

Educators have noted the importance of relational community building in increasing students' engagement and motivation (Pianta & Allen, 2008); enhancing relationships between teachers, students, families, and among peers has also been implicated as a means of improving schools in general (Weinstein, 2002); and in some cases, the development of an interpersonally supportive environment is in itself a goal of the intervention. In these programs, empowerment results from eliciting emotionally appropriate and satisfying responses from others (Jordan, 2001; Maton & Salem, 1995), which also may provide the support necessary for participants to embrace and adapt to

opportunities for empowerment occurring outside of the program (Maton & Salem, 1995).

Strengths-based programs strive to foster the emotional and social assets necessary for youth to thrive (National Research Council, 2003). They often do so through the creation of settings that are characterized by physical security, as well as sufficient psychological and emotional safety (National Research Council, 2003; Tseng & Seidman, 2007) for discussions that stretch participants emotionally and socially to occur. As a result, strengths-based programs with socio-emotional goals are primarily concerned with relational community building in order to establish environments that are conducive to the discussion of emotional experiences.

The development of relational communities, which allow for discussion of personally salient topics, may make strengths-based programs especially appealing techniques for all adolescents, who are characteristically oriented towards assimilation into groups of their peers (Bearman & Moody, 2004; Dreyfoos, 1998). These tendencies may position adolescent males to benefit greatly from the intentional process of relational community building, and strength-based programs more broadly.

The process of relational community building differs across programs serving young men and women (Cervantes & Englar-Carlson, 2008; Holyoake, 2005; Kiselica, 2008; Kiselica, 2009), as the relational strengths and tendencies attributed to each gender are often considered distinct (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). According to feminist scholar Jean Baker Miller (1975), psychological problems are rooted in the deprivation of full consciousness with which to understand life experiences, which results in distorted

perceptions of one's life history and the social and material resources to which individuals can and should have access. Miller (1975) argues that men and women are denied distinct aspects of consciousness, and as a result, the genders tend to conceptualize their experiences and the interpersonal resources in their environments differently, shaping the ways in which they approach and utilize others as social and emotional resources. Specifically, while feminist thinkers have identified the need for emotional connection and empathetic responsiveness in both men and women, traits associated with these phenomena are generally considered feminine (Freedberg, 2007), and women are encouraged to identify their social and emotional needs and ask others for help in meeting them, to a far greater extent than men (Miller, 1975). As a result, men may benefit from the intentional development of and explicit direction towards aspects of a social setting that would enable them to openly explore their social and emotional needs and receive and provide help in meeting them.

### **The Council**

The Council is a strengths-based intervention program designed specifically for boys and young men. As a form of therapy group, The Council involves aspects of both sensitivity training and large group awareness training (Forsyth, 2004). Sensitivity training focuses on personal growth, sensitivity to others, and enhancing the quality of participants' relationships and positive emotions (Forsyth, 2004). In large group awareness training, members attempt to improve their relationships by developing and practicing interpersonal interactions within the group through role-playing, group singing and chanting, and facilitator-guided interactions (Forsyth, 2004). As a social

intervention, The Council, like most evidence-based practice, is a model program, in that each group session is conducted on the basis of detailed protocols described in facilitator training manuals and curriculum guides (Weisz, Sandler, Durlak, & Anton, 2005). From an intervention policy standpoint, The Council is a type of counteraction, in that it attempts to retroactively provide its participants with the basic needs and developmental competencies that they may have been prevented from attaining in other environments (Sandler et al., 2004).

Each cycle of The Council is intended to take place over a ten-week period, with groups of six to ten boys, of approximately the same age and development, meeting with one to two facilitators for one and a half to two hours at a time (Hossfeld & Taormina, 2007). In most settings, closed groups are recommended, such that the same participants and facilitators gather every week, although the curricula that shape each meetings' activities may be adapted for use in high-transition settings where attendance and group membership is unpredictable (Hossfeld & Taormina, 2007). The Council facilitator manuals emphasize the importance of maintaining a consistent meeting structure, to provide predictability, build familiarity, and to set the group meetings apart from other interactions and routines in participants' environments (Hossfeld & Taormina, 2007).

Every Council session begins with an opening ritual, a brief ceremonial greeting that each group determines during their initial meeting, followed by an introduction to the week's theme, a brief physical activity, and a check-in, during which each participant greets the group and shares their response to a prompt (Hossfeld & Taormina, 2007). Check-ins are followed by physical, problem-solving, or verbal activities that explore the

week's theme, a group discussion intended to help participants synthesize the activity and its relevance to the theme, and a closing ritual, described by The Council's founders as "loud and emotional, culminating in a shout of jubilation" (Hossfeld & Toarmina, 2007, p.51).

During each group's first meeting, the facilitator(s) assist participants in generating a group agreement, or a list of guidelines that all members agree to follow to ensure that the group remains a safe and comfortable environment for the young men to be honest and disclosing, and which is displayed during every group meeting thereafter. To encourage respectful and effective communication, Council groups use "talking pieces," which may be any object of significance for the group, and which participants pass among themselves to indicate who has the floor to speak at any given time. Meeting themes vary by the age and interests of the group members, but examples include unity, peer pressure, values, bullying, conflict resolution, sexuality, diversity, life skills, and relationships (Hossfeld & Taormina, 2007).

**Program model.** During the spring and summer of 2010, I developed a program model, systematically representing the relationships among the resources available to operate The Council, and the program's intended activities and results, outlining the processes that occur in Council groups, in collaboration with one of the program's creators, Beth Hossfeld. The model was originally designed to assist in the program evaluation by detailing the mechanisms through which The Council is presumed to work, enabling a focused examination of the specific relationships and variables that may be most influential in determining the program's outcomes.

The model (see Appendix A) was developed through consultation of The Council facilitator handbooks and curriculum guides, conversations with Ms. Hossfeld, and attendance at a training workshop that Ms. Hossfeld led for facilitators of Girls Circle, a parallel program for adolescent women. Research is yet to verify that the program model accurately reflects youths' experience in the program-- the following paragraphs describe the processes that The Council participants are *believed* to experience, if the program is implemented precisely as intended.

The uniform structure of each Council meeting is considered a resource, as it encourages participants' engagement in the program and group cohesion, and generates comfort and safety by establishing predictable routines. The activities that compose each Council session are included in the program's curriculum guides because of their relevance to issues that adolescent males face, their fit to adolescent males' activity level and style of engagement, and their pertinence to topics of interest for adolescent men. The activities serve as rites of passage for participants, create opportunities for experiential learning and social and emotional development, and serve as bridges between the content of the group meetings and participants' real life experiences. The program structure and component activities create unifying experiences for members of Council groups and provide opportunities for them to share their diverse perspectives on events they encounter both inside and outside of the program, enabling the exchange of ideas about managing challenges and making decisions.

It is proposed that Council facilitators help establish and enforce a culture of appropriate responsiveness among the youth in their groups by role modeling sensitive

and appropriate interactions and decision-making, forging relationships with individual group members, and fostering group unity and cohesion through their relationships with the group as a whole. In doing so, the role of the facilitator is intended to ensure that participants' self-disclosures, particularly those regarding traumas, are met with empathy, validation, and respect.

Among the resources that participants are thought to bring to the program are their knowledge, wisdom, and innate preference for living according to diverse, adaptive, and healthy pro-social values. These resources presumably motivate participants' genuine participation and confidence in their abilities to rise to challenges that they encounter within the group and beyond. Participants are also thought to enter The Council having been exposed to mainstream images and conceptualizations of masculinity, which may generate pressures to conform to similar masculine ideals. Shared exposure to these mainstream portrayals of masculinity theoretically enables participants to identify the commonality of the shame that they may experience, regarding their inability to fulfill the traditional male gender role as depicted in the media.

The empathetic, validating, nonjudgmental, and respectful atmosphere which facilitators assist in establishing could enable open and authentic conversation about the strengths possessed by individual participants and their whole groups, as well as experiences of mainstream masculinity. Group members' perceptions of common shame surrounding masculinity and willingness to genuinely participate in discussions may further contribute to critical discussions of how expectations of mainstream masculinity



have featured in their lives. Conversation of this nature theoretically helps participants to recognize the existence of multiple and flexible definitions of masculinity, which, in turn, reduces their shame surrounding their ability to manifest the traditional male gender role. This reduction of shame, in combination with the influence of the program structure, activities, and effective facilitation, may enable participants to recognize, practice, and develop confidence in their relational strengths, sense of identity, and pro-social decision making skills. Stronger relational competence and sense of identity, and pro-social decision making skills are assumed to enhance participants' receptivity to engaging in genuine interactions with other young men and adults, further enabling them to identify their commonalities, which, circularly, reduces the amount of shame that participants experience regarding their enactment of the traditional male gender role.

According to the program theory, as Council participants move through this cycle, they increase their participation in genuine and healthy relationships with their peers inside and outside of their program, their families, other members of their communities, and their schools. Participants also become more accountable for their decisions and behavior, gain awareness about issues surrounding respect and responsibility in their relationships with romantic partners, and engage in increased healthy and legal decision making.

This model was developed retroactively, after data collection for the program evaluation was well underway. As a result, there is not a direct correspondence between the available data regarding participants' experiences in The Council and the model of

how the program is intended to function, limiting the ability of this thesis to directly confirm specific aspects of the program model.

One theme that runs throughout the model, though it is not explicitly specified at any one point, is the centrality of emotional safety. One of the greatest contributions of the program structure is its ability to provide safety through predictability. Facilitators' primary responsibilities include modeling and enforcing appropriate responsiveness to cultivate open and genuine conversation about sensitive topics. The program relies on youths' shared experiences of masculinity to help participants identify their commonalities so that they may feel safe from judgment and become attuned to the insecurities of their peers. Thus, many of the facets of The Council are intended to generate emotional safety. Within the hypothetical model of program functioning, emotional safety is positioned as a precursor to reducing shame, participating in relationships, and generating the program's intended outcomes.

A main purpose of this thesis is therefore to examine Council participants' perceptions of emotional safety within the context of the program, and the antecedents and outcomes associated with participants' experiences of emotional safety. Specifically, this thesis addresses how emotional safety may be a function of participants' similarity to their group members, and how their experiences of safety may be associated with participants' experiences of the program's intended outcomes.

The following sections include an exploration of definitions and descriptions of emotional safety, a review of literature discussing the importance of emotional safety and the purposes that emotional safety serves, and a discussion of the elements of emotional

safety that are most relevant for this thesis and how they may each be facilitated by similarity among participants. Two theories linking emotional safety to attitudinal change are also reviewed.

### **Emotional Safety**

**Definitions.** In my search through the academic literature, I failed to identify a cohesive body of writing about what constitutes emotional safety, or any discrete canon covering theory and research on emotional safety. Across authors, both within and across disciplines, I found very few explicit definitions of psychological or emotional safety, and little consensus regarding operationalization of the construct. As a result, I thought it might be helpful to explore what emotional safety is *not*, to identify what an absence of emotional safety might look like. The following sections include descriptions of what may be considered markers of emotional danger and the ambiguity therein, and descriptions of emotionally and psychologically safe contexts from several disciplines and areas of psychology.

The child abuse and neglect literature includes some descriptions of what an acute *absence* of emotional safety looks like. Indicators of child emotional abuse have included: rejecting, isolating, terrorizing, ignoring, corrupting, verbally assaulting, overpressuring, spurning, exploiting/corrupting, denying emotional responsiveness, and unwanted denial of mental health care, medical care, or education (Hamarman, Pope & Czaja, 2002). According to the Federal Child Abuse and Prevention Treatment Act 42 (United States Code, 1996, as cited in Hamarman et al., 2002), conveying to children that they are worthless, flawed, unwanted, endangered, or only valuable for the purpose of

meeting another's needs may create a sufficient lack of emotional safety as to be considered criminal. However, in the absence of a more explicit definition of emotional or psychological threat, as of 1998, only forty-three states reported incidents of emotional abuse to the National Center for Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, as opposed to forty-eight states that reported the more easily identifiable and objectively definable incidents child physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect (Hamarman et al., 2002). Among those states that did report emotional abuse, the rates that they reported varied significantly more than the reported rates of physical and sexual abuse (Hamarman et al., 2002), perhaps indicating variability in states' interpretations of the Federal Child Abuse and Prevention Treatment Act 42's description of emotional abuse and speaking to its vagueness.

Considering the difficulty of explicitly defining an acute lack of emotional safety, it is not surprising that descriptions of the potentially more ubiquitous and ideally more common phenomenon are equally vague, varied and open to interpretation, if not more so. Dworken (1999) obtained adolescent youth's perceptions of emotional safety through focus groups with 126 campers from 11 sleep-away camps in the Northeast. These youth conveyed how they conceive of emotional safety in addressing why they consider camp a "safe" environment: "lots of people care about you and you don't have worry about material or emotional needs;" "At camp we don't need to impress anyone and there isn't the peer pressure;" "Here it is safe to be different, express myself, wear whatever I want, and say whatever I think, to be who we are;" "Actually, why I love camp so much is that it is a place for a short period of time where you don't have to deal with all the emotional

junk” (Dworken, 1999). Through their responses, these young people imply that they experience emotional safety when they are confident that those around them care about their wellbeing, that others will not induce intense emotional fluctuations, and that their peers accept them as they are and will not pressure them to change or stifle their self-expression.

Educators’ descriptions of emotional safety in schools also include allusions to confidence in being accepted: “not being made fun of,” “unconditional acceptance,” the ability to “wear my natural face instead of a fake one,” “being able to act, think, and feel without fear. It means being able to try activities I’m not good at, express my ideas without censoring them, display my feelings and have them respected, question my teachers without fear of punishment. It means being able to take risks and expose what I don’t know” (Bluestein, 2001). These educators describe emotionally safe environments for learning as those that allow all students, regardless of individual differences of any variety, to achieve their maximum potential academically, personally, and socially and to experience a sense of belonging, being welcomed and valued and treated with respect and dignity (Bluestein, 2001). Teachers and school administrators emphasize the importance of recognizing each students’ strengths as a means of generating enough security to allow students to reveal their weaknesses and ask for help: “having one’s own unique talents, skills, and qualities valued, recognized and acknowledged,” “the freedom to not be good at a particular skill, make mistakes, forget, or need additional practice and still be treated respectfully and with acceptance” (Bluestein, 2001).

Haddon, Goodman, Park & Crick (2005) offer more formal definitions of concepts relevant to emotional safety in educational contexts, describing emotional intelligence as individuals' abilities to understand and process emotional information and utilize their relationships within a given context to improve these skills. Emotional intelligence is considered a setting-specific phenomenon that emerges through interactions between organizations (such as schools) and the individuals that belong to the organizations, as opposed to a property of either individuals or organizations in isolation (Haddon et al., 2005). Emotional literacy is the practice of interacting with others in a way that fosters understanding of both one's own and others' emotions, and incorporating this information into one's behavior, enabling individuals to intuit the thoughts and feelings of others (Haddon et al., 2005). Emotional literacy is considered more a practice than an ability, and may be intentionally cultivated in educational settings (Haddon et al., 2005).

In describing the process of establishing emotional safety, clinical literature conveys a conceptualization of emotional safety as an internal state, characterized by the ability to exclude personal histories of trauma and victimization from one's identity (White, 2005). White (2005) has proposed that children's emotional safety can be achieved by helping them identify the strengths that they exhibited and cultivated in coping with traumatic events, and locate these strengths centrally in their identities, to create a buffer against the role of victim-hood in their conceptions of themselves. White (2005) describes emotional safety as the state of having built an identity around one's strengths, such that discussing previous trauma does not put a child at risk of allowing

trauma to become a defining feature of their identity. This description of emotional safety seems compatible with the broader definition of emotional safety as the internal state of perceiving social and emotional wellbeing (Hagglund, Clark, Farmer & Sherman, 2004).

Emotional safety has also been examined as a feature of educational and work environments. Within educational contexts, emotionally safe environments are those that offer youth refuge from difficulties in classes, mistreatment or rejection by their peers, or distressing home environments (Bluestein, 2001), are characterized by a culture of cohesion and inclusion, and promote respectful, validating, understanding, and open peer group relationships (Haddon et al., 2005).

Emotional safety is considered a defining component of a psychological sense of community in the workplace, along with coworker support, a sense of belonging, a spiritual bond with others in the environment, a team orientation, and truth-telling (Burroughs & Eby, 1998). A factor analysis confirmed that emotional safety is a distinct component of psychological sense of community at work, when operationalized by the following items regarding the workplace (Burroughs & Eby, 1998):

1. It is safe enough to share my successes and strengths with others in this organization.
2. It is safe enough to share my personal limitations (e.g., areas in which I lack competency with others in this organization).
3. I feel safe enough to ask for help from others in this organization.
4. Management feels safe sharing information with staff.

5. I am able to freely share my passion about my work to others in this organization.

6. It is safe enough to share difficult emotions (e.g., hurt, loss, fear) with others in this organization.

Organizational emotional literacy is most likely to emerge in environments where communication is transparent, warm, engaging, and evolving; where organizational culture is characterized by cohesion, alignment, support, reflection orientation and empowerment; where relationships are generally trusting, open, empathetic, respectful and validating relationships; and individuals' emotional experiences are those of by safety, acceptance, inclusion, and feeling listened to and competent (Haddon et al., 2005). Emotionally literate organizations give rise to emotionally safe environments, in which individuals *can* speak about their feelings should they wish to do so, but are not expected to engage in emotional disclosures when they would rather not, where permission to discuss feelings is given, issues regarding the appropriateness of disclosures and responses to disclosures are recognized, and there is an expressed commitment to working constructively with participants' emotional experiences (Haddon et al., 2005).

In addition to individuals and environments, relationships are also a unit of analysis for emotional safety (Prisbell & Anderson, 1980). Relationships are considered safe when participants perceive them as secure, straightforward, non-threatening, and logical (Prisbell & Anderson, 1980). Relational safety is characterized by freedom from shaming and blaming (Joliff & Home, 1996) and is evidenced by individuals' willingness to seek help within the context of such relationships (Wilson & Deane, 2001). Interviews



with students regarding their tendencies to approach others for assistance revealed that seeking help from any source was primarily a matter of their relationship with any potential source of help, trust, and the belief that their problem would be validated and normalized by their chosen helper (Wilson & Deane, 2001). Students described those relationships within which they were most likely to seek help as “friendly, individual, emotionally safe, genuine, and confidential” (Wilson & Deane, 2001, p. 355).

Two additional components of relational safety are rhetorical sensitivity and the suppression of negative spontaneity, or off-the-top-of-the-head comments (Phillips, Pederson & Wood, 1979). As a feature of relationships, rhetorical sensitivity is the acceptance of role-taking and mutuality, the avoidance of overly stylized verbal behavior, willingness to adapt to relationship partners’ rhetorical patterns, carefully considered what information is acceptable for communication, and understanding that the ways in which ideas are expressed may be differentially effective (Hart & Burks, 1972).

In the framework of The Council, emotional safety is defined as participants’ ability to “experience trusted relationships in which they feel valued and supported; they are safe from verbal and racial harassment” (Hossfeld et al., 2008, p. 64). Program materials also broadly define social/cultural safety, distinct from emotional safety, as “practices, attitudes, and activities enhance boys’ comfort and trust when they honor and recognize boys’ varied traditions, class, and beliefs” (Hossfeld et al., 2008, p. 64).

**The importance of emotional safety.** Despite ambiguity surrounding definitions of emotional safety, its presence may be crucial to the implementation of The Council. According to the program model’s representation of program functioning, the

recognition, development, and confidence in youth's own, and others' relational strengths, sense of identity and pro-social decision-making skills, and the reduction of shame, which theoretically generate the program's intended changes, are dependent upon group interactions that are imbued with emotional safety. Any genuine self-expression is presumably dependent upon confidence in the safety of a relational environment, and maintaining the safety of all group members is one of the facilitators' principle roles. Program material states that "of utmost importance is the facilitator's primary task – protecting the physical, emotional and social/cultural safety of the group" (Hossfeld et al., 2008, p. 64).

Emotional safety is considered a crucial dynamic in other contexts as well. In the criminal justice system, creating an atmosphere of safety is the first level of intervention in facilitating recovery from trauma and chemical dependency (Covington, 2007), and helping children to work through trauma in clinical situations is dependent upon their physical and emotional safety (White, 2005). The presence of safety and supportive relationships are the most commonly used indicators of social contexts that are supportive of youths' developmental needs (Connell, Gambone & Smith, 2000; Gambone & Arberton, 1997; Theokas & Lerner, 2006). In their description of educational settings that foster positive development, Eccles and Gootman (2002) place physical and psychological safety first, followed by clear and consistent structure and appropriate supervision, supportive relationships, opportunities to belong, positive social norms, support for efficacy and mattering, opportunities for skill building, and integration of family, school, and community efforts. Connell, Gambone and Smith (2000) identified

five “non-negotiable” supports and opportunities that all communities must provide for youth in order for them to become responsible, skilled, and competent adults: adequate nutrition, health and shelter; multiple supportive relationships, characterized by high, clear, and fair expectations, a sense of boundaries, respect, and mutuality; challenging and engaging activities and learning experiences; opportunities for involvement and membership; and physical and emotional safety. These needs are not arranged hierarchically, indicating that emotional safety and the physical needs of nutrition, health, and shelter are of equal importance in the area of youth development.

Emotional safety is a primary concern, in intervention programs and beyond, because so many major threats in our society come from other individuals’ capacity to make us feel vulnerable, combined with a ubiquitous inability to confidently turn to others to address such feelings of insecurity (Miller, 1975). An objective of The Council, as well as other strengths-based programs that emphasize relational community building, is to enable participants to avail themselves of the supports that others may provide to combat this vulnerability (Hossfeld et al., 2008; Maton & Salem, 1995). However, self-disclosure, particularly regarding vulnerabilities, is often perceived as a risk, the magnitude of which is determined by the amount of safety that an individual feels in a particular community (Prisbell & Anderson, 1980). Only when individuals are confident that they are not going to be shamed or blamed by others are they eager to communicate openly, honestly, and directly about issues of concern to them (Jolliff & Horne, 1996).

Emotional safety in groups does not refer exclusively to safety from other group members; emotionally safe groups also enable members to reflect on previous trauma

with less risk of allowing it to consume them. Men may avoid discussing issues that cause them to feel pain or rage, for fear that if they allow themselves to fully experience these feelings, they will overtake them, and they may hurt themselves or others as a result (Jolliff & Horne, 1996). However, if an emotionally safe group is present, they may be trusted to intervene to prevent members from inflicting harm upon themselves or others, in turn liberating individuals to approach issues that they may otherwise have avoided (Jolliff & Horne, 1996). An emotionally safe group also helps its members develop a cushion of strengths before delving into issues that could threaten their self-concepts: in strengths-based programs in particular, members of emotionally safe groups are oriented towards recognizing their own strengths as well as others', assisting participants in identifying their skills and points of resilience and incorporating these into their self-concepts (Maton et al., 2004). Recognizing and developing strengths prior to discussing trauma prevents individuals from reliving the traumatic experience through discussing it and reincorporating it as a primary facet of their identities (White, 2005). Therefore, even if emotional safety was absent from the theoretical model of The Council's mechanisms of generating positive change, there is sufficient evidence that emotional safety is a critical component of any generative interpersonal environment, and identifying the factors that contribute to emotional safety may reveal which environments may be most conducive to personal growth.

**How safety is achieved.** After reviewing the literature regarding emotional safety in various contexts, I have synthesized five factors that I believe contribute to the presence of emotional safety in groups, and which would be important to foster in

Council groups: freedom from shaming and blaming, willingness to approach others for help, maintenance of positive and respectful regard for fellow group members, sense of community, and group cohesion.

***Freedom from shaming and blaming.*** In their analysis of psychotherapy groups for middle-class American men, Jolliff and Horne (1996) identified immunity from shaming and blaming as a crucial dynamic for ensuring the emotional safety necessary for open communication. Being reproached and made to feel shameful about one's thoughts, feelings, and personal histories would create a hostile environment, as opposed to one in which group members feel that they will be accepted. Empathy, defined as a situation-specific capacity to respond 'vicariously' to a stimulus encountered by another person, or experience another person's thoughts or feelings as if they were one's own (Duan & Hill, 1996), may contribute to decreased shaming and blaming. Empathetic interactions involve less shaming and blaming because they are characterized by the ability to join with another person cognitively and affectively, comprehending their interpersonal needs and motivations (Covington, 2007). When an individual is capable of understanding and vicariously experiencing another's thoughts and feelings, their ability to avoid passing judgment may be heightened, and there is a greater likelihood that the subject of their empathy will feel heard and understood (West, 2005).

The environments most devoid of shaming and blaming are those characterized by *mutuality* of empathy. In mutually empathetic relationships, each participant shares their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, and allows themselves to be visibly moved by the other's disclosures (Covington, 2007). Empathy has its greatest impact when each

person involved can see and feel that they have created an emotional reaction someone else, when it is apparent that disclosing aspects of their personal histories have created an emotional reaction in another person (Freedberg, 2007). When an individual recognizes that someone is actively empathizing with them, they may feel a greater kinship and solidarity with them, be more willing to empathize with them in return, and hesitate to shame and blame them for their actions, thoughts, and feelings.

*Help seeking.* Established barriers to help-seeking, including fears of being perceived as inadequate, embarrassment, and resultant threats to self esteem (Wills, 1992) reflect a fear of rejection by those who witness the help-seeking episode, indicating a lack of confidence in the emotional safety of an environment. Mitigating concerns about negative responses to help-seeking is a function of establishing faith in the emotional safety of a group. The likelihood that a person will approach others for help therefore depends on their conviction that they will not be judged on the basis of their requests for help—their trust in their fellow group members to avoid shaming and blaming (Jolliff & Horne, 1996), in the quality of their relationships with those they approach, and in the validation that they expect to receive in response to their desire for help (Wilson & Deane, 2001), all of which are determined by confidence that their partners understand them (Cahn, 1990), and are included in definitions of emotional safety (Blustein, 2001; Haddon et al., 2005; Wilson & Deane, 2001).

*Positive and respectful regard for group members.* Many descriptions of emotionally safe environments and relationships allude to the presence of respect: unconditional acceptance, freedom from harassment and intimidation, using understandings of others' feelings to respond pro-socially, receptivity to others' disclosures when and only when they feel comfortable sharing, actively listening to others' concerns, hopes, and fears, and avoiding making others feel ashamed of their emotional experiences (Bluestein, 2001; Burroughs & Eby, 1998; Haddon et al., 2005; Jolliff & Horne, 1996).

According to the Council facilitator guide, "of paramount importance is respect and confidentiality within the group. The group is compromised and sincerity dissolves when void of these two components" (Hossfeld et al., 2008, p. 83). When group members demonstrate their appreciation and regard for each other, and use their influence to challenge disrespectful and interpersonally irresponsible behavior, participants experience greater emotional safety and security (Hossfeld et al., 2008).

One way in which respect for fellow group members is demonstrated is through the maintenance of confidentiality: one of The Council facilitators' primary roles is maintaining confidentiality as the "Protector of the Council" (Hossfeld et al., 2008), emphasizing to their groups the importance of only discussing disclosures made to the group within the Council, out of respect for the program and its participants. Breaking confidentiality is interpreted as a lack of respect for the group and its members. Furthermore, confidentiality contributes to a group's safety by assuring members that their disclosures will not be misrepresented or shared with others, whose relationships

with group members may not be characterized by emotional safety (Hossfeld et al., 2008).

*Sense of community.* Descriptions of emotional safety as a property of environments are intertwined with descriptions of community (Bluestein, 2001; Burroughs & Eby, 1998; Haddon et al., 2005). It is not apparent whether emotionally safe environments enable the evolution of community, or if environments embody emotional safety because of the communities that exists therein. Due to the emphasis on intentionally constructing relational communities in strengths-based programming (Maton, 2000; Maton & Salem, 1995; Tseng & Seidman, 2007), establishing community may be considered a prerequisite for emotional safety in the context of strengths-based programs. The four components of community are Spirit/Membership, Influence/Trust, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection (McMillan, 1996; McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Membership was initially defined by feelings of belonging or personal relatedness, which establish sentimental boundaries between those who belong to a given community and those who do not, demarcating the boundaries of an emotionally safe interpersonal setting (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In a later conceptualization of community, the phrase “Spirit” replaced “Membership,” shifting the emphasis from tangible markers of community involvement to the essence of the relationships that comprise the community (McMillan, 1996). The boundaries of a community are defined by the feelings of friendship and safety that individuals experience to a greater extent in the presence of community members than anyone else (McMillan, 1996). These



boundaries provide the structure and security that enable Emotional Safety/The Truth (McMillan, 1996; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Well-defined boundaries, which are synonymous with strong feelings of friendship, create social environments in which community members experience sufficient safety and courage to make disclosures about their internal experiences, their personal Truths, and respond to others' with empathy (McMillan, 1996). The boundaries that Spirit creates also generate a sense of belonging and identification (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), more recently conceptualized as "faith that I will belong" and "acceptance" of community members as such (McMillan, 1996).

Influence (McMillan & Chavis, 1986)/Trust (McMillan, 1996) is the second component of community, originally defined as a sense of mattering and having some degree of influence in a group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), or trust that authority figures thoughtfully consider other community members' input (McMillan, 1996). A sense of Spirit, or friendship, with respected authority becomes Trust that one matters to that authority, and therefore to the community as a whole (McMillan, 1996). Community-wide Trust is evidenced by conforming behavior, which indicates that a group validates its members' contributions enough to uniformly adopt them (McMillan, 1996).

The third component of community involves integrating and fulfilling members' needs with the resources that result from group membership (McMillan, 1996; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Strong communities are able to fit together members with complementary needs so that each member feels satisfied with their group involvement and is able to attain status and competence within the group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The ability of a community to fulfill the emotional and intellectual needs of all of its

members depends on the extent to which they have shared values, which McMillan and Chavis (1986) consider emotional and intellectual needs and the order in which they are prioritized and addressed. As group members with shared values come together, they recognize the similarity of their needs and priorities, and receive validation of the significance of such needs, which encourages them to prolong their group membership to better satisfy these needs collectively (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

The fourth component of sense of community is Shared Emotional Connection, defined as members' commitment and belief that they have shared will continue to share a history, common places, time together, and similar experiences with other members of the community (McMillan, 1996; McMillan & Chavis, 1986), creating a sense of unity and a community culture. The more important and salient the shared events, the more their occurrence strengthens community members' bonds to others who also experience them (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

*Cohesion.* Group cohesion has been described as the result of all forces that contribute to members' continued identification with and membership in, a group (Festinger, 1950 as cited in Cartwright, 1986); as members' personal involvement, interest, identification, sense of belonging, and desire to remain in their group (Cartwright, 1986); as the mutual attraction among group members (Pepitone & Reichling, 1955) and; as members' respect for each other, shared values, and tendencies to agree with each other, look to each other for support, and move in the same direction, ideologically and intellectually (Phillips, Pederson & Wood, 1979).

Cohesion contributes to emotional safety through providing security to group members, for their members, reducing their anxiety and heightening their self-esteem with regard to their participation in the group (Cartwright, 1968). Members of cohesive groups provide each other with strength, support and respect (Pepitone & Reichling, 1955; Phillips et al., 1979), which enables members of highly cohesive groups to display less restraint in their interpersonal interactions (Pepitone & Reichling, 1955). These dynamics parallel many components of the various descriptions of emotional safety (Bluestein, 2001; Haddon et al., 2005; Wilson & Deane, 2001).

Members of cohesive groups are more concerned with their membership, and are more motivated to contribute to the group's welfare than less cohesive groups (Cartwright, 1968). This heightened involvement increases groups' potency, vitality, and significance to their members (Cartwright, 1968). If groups are characterized by their ability to provide emotional safety, greater cohesiveness will therefore motivate individual members to maintain and further the presence of emotional safety within the

group. The 'power' of a group to lead its members to conform to its norms is also related to its cohesiveness (Cartwright, 1968; Cartwright & Zander, 1968); members of cohesive groups would be more likely to conform to norms of maintaining emotional safety than members of less cohesive groups that also attempt to establish emotional safety. The greater a group's cohesion, the greater its members' tendencies to provide and accept supports for the group's goals (Pepitone & Reichling, 1955) and participate in group activities (Cartwright, 1968), therefore increasing its 'capacity.' In the case of groups with socio-emotional goals, greater cohesiveness will make members more likely to accept, embrace, and participate in strategies and activities that contribute to emotional safety.

### **Similarity and Emotional Safety**

Similarity directly contributes to feelings of emotional safety. Broadly speaking, we are attracted to people that we perceive as similar to ourselves (Cartwright, 1968). Communities begin to form as potential members seek others with whom they share traits, bonding begins with the recognition of commonalities, and the discovery of similarity may serve as protection from shame (McMillan, 1996): “if one can find people with similar ways of looking, feeling, thinking, and being, then it is assumed that one has found a place where one can safely be oneself” (McMillan, 1996, p. 321). Similarity also enhances group members’ freedom from shaming and blaming, willingness to approach others for help, maintenance of positive and respectful regard for fellow group members, sense of community, and group cohesion.

Liking and attraction to others are based on similarity with regard to salient characteristics of the group with which an individual identifies (Cartwright, 1968). This phenomenon is heightened in situations that produce arousal and anxiety: when individuals encounter threatening situations, they experience greater attraction to other members of their group, as a source of safety and security (Cartwright, 1968). The Council facilitation material (Hossfeld et al., 2008) includes an entire section regarding cultural cliques, thereby acknowledging that they are likely to form within larger groups as participants gravitate towards those who make them feel secure in the potentially novel contexts of The Council and the institutions in which the program is implemented.

*Similarity and freedom from shaming and blaming.* Perceiving similarity between another person’s situation and one’s own experience is a necessary component

of any empathetic exchange (Hakansson & Montgomery, 2003), as a basis of comprehending another's emotional response to their circumstances. The amount of comparable experience within any group of individuals should therefore influence the extent of their ability to empathize with each other, with more experiential similarity enabling participation in, and expression of, more validation and less shaming and blaming of others, creating an environment of greater interpersonal safety.

*Similarity and help-seeking.* A theme that emerges from the help seeking literature is people's greater willingness to approach others for help when they feel that they will be able to reciprocate or redeem themselves by providing help to others (Wills, 1992). People who have the shared experience of common problems are at an advantage for reciprocally providing help to one another and are perceived as being knowledgeable and experienced in negotiating the problem (Borkman, 1976; Wills, 1992). Despite findings that individuals are less likely to seek help from others that they perceive as similar to themselves (Nadler, 1987; Nadler & Fisher, 1984), self-help and psychotherapy groups are often composed of individuals in congruous situations (Frost, 1996). This allows identification between group members and superficial bonding to occur more rapidly, expediting members' trust in each others' knowledge and empathy (Borkman, 1976; Frost, 1996), implying that similarity can generate at least as much safety as it may compromise, through its influence on relationships.

Relationships are at the root of all three factors that Wilson and Deane (2001) identified as determinants of adolescents' help-seeking behavior: trust that potential helpers will avoid shaming and blaming, that their relationships are characterized by

understanding, and that their helper will validate their need for help. The abilities to avoid shaming and blaming, understand another's thoughts and feelings, and provide genuine validation are all enhanced by the ability to perceive another's needs and motivations (Covington, 2007), are therefore deeply intertwined with the capacity for empathy. As participation in mutual empathy is dependent upon shared experience (Hakansson & Montgomery, 2003), experiential similarity among group members should enhance emotional safety through help-seeking behavior.

*Similarity and positive, respectful regard.* An individual's popularity within a group is determined by his or her similarity to other group members (Cartwright, 1968). Individuals tend to prefer members of their own in-group (Brewer, 1979), and inter-group competition, similarity, and status differentials make the distinctions between a person's in-group and out-groups salient, such that greater similarity among individuals increases the likelihood that they will consider each other members of their own in-group (Brewer, 1979). Attraction and liking are partially determined by individuals' similarity along dimensions of importance to them (Cartwright, 1968), such that individuals feel most positively about those with whom they have the most in common. Similarity, then, directly corresponds to idiosyncrasy credits, or the positive impressions of a person held by others, which in turn, correspond to an individual's influence within their group (Forsyth, 1990): the most influential group members are perceived as the most homophilous, possessing attitudes, moral persuasions, and backgrounds that are more similar to those of the whole group (McCroskey, Richmond & Daly, 1975). In order for a group member to explicitly influence others, they must have the respect of those whose

thoughts, feelings, or behavior they shape. Therefore, group members who are highly similar to the rest of their group tend to be the most respected, in addition to the best liked. Furthermore, more thorough understanding of another's relational needs and motivations may contribute to greater respect for their actions, thoughts, and opinions (Covington, 2007), highlighting the importance mutual empathy, and its dependence upon similarity, in generating respect.

*Similarity and Sense of Community.* Within the field of community psychology, communities are often considered homogeneous groups with few inter-individual differences, and definitions have often stressed the necessity of similarities among community members in the development of a community identity (Wiesenfeld, 1996). In creating a community identity, differences among members are simplified, while points of similarity are highlighted (Weisenfeld, 1996): shared experiences and processes that create comparable characteristics, actions, and perspectives among members are emphasized in the formation of a community identity (Wiesenfeld, 1996). Similarity also contributes to each of the components of community identified by McMillan and Chavis (1986) and McMillan (1996).

The Membership/Spirit of a community is synonymous with the friendships therein, which indicate the boundaries of the community (McMillan, 1996). As similarity is a determinant of friendship (Altermatt & Pomerantz, 2003; Cartwright, 1968; Sullivan, 1953), similarity is directly related to the Membership/Spirit of a community. Among non-friends, similarity increases the frequency and quality of interactions, as common meanings, attitudes, and beliefs, communicated through shared language, are associated



with more frequent and effective social exchanges (Prisbell & Anderson, 1980). As children seek to establish close friendships, they consider the similarity between their own engagement in academic tasks and that of their peers, preferring those whose level of engagement is comparable to their own (Altermatt & Pomerantz, 2003). Those adolescent friendships characterized by shared interests, attitudes, and behaviors are most likely to fulfill the basic social needs of companionship and intimacy (Sullivan, 1953), and the most rewarding close friendships are those in which both partners pursue activities and interests that they find mutually engaging (Sullivan, 1953).

Similarity also increases community members' Influence/Trust that they are influential, as an individual's similarity to others directly corresponds to their influence within the community (McCroskey et al., 1975). Additionally, those who allow themselves to be most influenced by the community also exert the greatest influence back on the community: those who resist the community's influence or attempt to dominate it are the least influential (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Individuals are more influenced by those who resemble them than by those who do not (Christakis & Fowler, 2007), and thus, individuals who are most similar to other members of their community are more receptive to the community's influence, and therefore more influential within the community.

Communities develop in order to accommodate the integration and fulfillment of members' needs, and individuals are drawn to communities in which they feel that their needs will be addressed (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Individuals choose to associate with specific communities because of their belief that the community will be able to fulfill

their needs (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The more closely an individual's needs resemble those of their group members, the more likely that the fulfillment of those needs will be, or already is, prioritized by the community, increasing the likelihood that those needs will be met.

Shared emotional connections also result from similarity. Shared emotional connections are founded on participation in or identification with shared history, and members' engagement in shared events can potentially serve to increase the strength of a community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). An examination of psychological sense of community in the workplace (Burroughs & Eby, 1998) went so far as to conclude that a sense of community may exist in the absence of liking among community members, so long as they have a sufficient amount of shared experiences. Thus, group members who have encountered more, and more similar, common experiences are likely to engage in more shared emotional connections within their community.

*Similarity and Cohesion.* Relational communities are able to form and thrive because they provide the space for members to identify their pre-existing commonalities and possess new things in common, enabling them to construct common bonds, solidarity, mutual concern and support, and the cohesion necessary to further build and sustain community (Aneess, 2003). 'Cohesion' and 'attraction to group' are often used interchangeably, reinforcing the assumption that the more a group's members like each other, the more attractive they consider the group, and more cohesive the group (Cartwright, 1968). Two interrelated factors that contribute to individuals' attraction to their community are their motive base for attraction and the incentive properties of the

group (Cartwright, 1968). An individual's motive base for attraction consists of their needs for affiliation, recognition, security, money, or other discrete outcomes that group membership may provide. The incentive properties of a group are those factors that shape members' motive bases for attraction (Cartwright, 1968). The more similar a group of individuals' motivations for joining a community, the more cohesive the community will be, as a result of its increased capacity to fulfill a narrower set of needs (Phillips et al., 1979), increasing members' attraction to the group, and therefore the group's cohesion.

It is also possible that individuals who are forced to belong to the same group, as opposed to joining willingly, may develop a high degree of cohesion and pride in their membership, through their identification and creation of commonalities (Cartwright & Zander, 1968). Every individual belongs to multiple groups, and some of the most salient similarities between people may be those that result from their constellations of group affiliations (Cartwright & Zander, 1968). When individuals are forced to participate in groups or communities, they may identify more closely with members of a subgroup therein than the larger group, establishing boundaries that create smaller pockets of intimacy and emotional safety within the larger community (Brodsky & Marx, 2001). This may create conflicts of loyalty or inhibit the concerted action of the larger group (Cartwright & Zander, 1968), but members of sub-communities may use their increased influence and understanding of each other to encourage their sub-community to support the functioning of the overarching group (Brodsky & Marx, 2001). Additionally, emotional safety within sub-communities is strengthened as members experience greater

cohesion with the larger group, simultaneously increasing the emotional safety of their sub-community as they make investments into the larger group (Brodsky & Marx, 2001).

Not only does similarity enhance feelings of attraction to other group members, but it also contributes directly to each of the components of emotional safety, such that similar groups may be more conducive to emotional safety than groups of youth who are very different from each other. As emotional safety is threaded throughout the Council model, which culminates in individuals' positive change, participants in groups with similar others may undergo the greatest positive change in their behaviors and belief systems, as assessed at the outcome. Two potential paths between emotional safety and positive change in the outcomes identified as important aspects of young men's lives, and therefore targeted by intervention and prevention programs, are detailed in the following section.

### **Theories of Change**

*Relational Cultural Theory*. Growth and psychological change is not only “the very essence of all life” (Miller, 1975, p. 54), but also the expressed purpose of The Council, which was designed under the assumption that the experience of interpersonal safety is necessary for participants to undergo changes in their behaviors and belief systems (Hossfeld & Taormina, 2007). According to the Relational Cultural Theory (Jordan, 2001), which guided the development of the present program (Hossfeld & Taormina, 2007), the primary mechanism of change is the experience of being heard and understood and eliciting emotionally appropriate responses from others, as individual development occurs exclusively through connection with others (Miller, 1975).

In order to experience being genuinely heard and understood, and to receive emotionally appropriate reactions to self-disclosures, an individual must first feel safe enough in their social environment to begin disclosing their thoughts and feelings (Jordan, 2001). In light of the literature reviewed above, regarding the role of similarity in establishing safe environments, it may be expected that the amount of change that participants attempt will result from their feelings of safety within their groups, which, in turn, results from their similarity to other members of their group.

The Relational Cultural Theory is considered a theory of feminist psychology, emerging from Jean Baker Miller’s *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (1976) (West, 2005). The theory was developed by Jean Baker Miller, Judith Jordan, Janet Surrey, and Irene Stiver at the Stone Center at Wellesley College (West, 2005, p. 106), by listening to women recount their experiences and incorporating the use of growth-fostering relationships into therapeutic settings (West, 2005). The theory has since been integrated

into approaches to clinical psychology, social work practice, and teaching (Edwards & Richards, 2002).

In the context of Relational Cultural Theory, connections are mutual, empathic, creative, energy-releasing, and empowering interactions that engender a sense of being attuned to one's self as well as others, and feeling understood and valued (Covington, 2007). In theories emerging from the Stone Center, lack of connections and relational violations are perceived as lying at the root of most psychological problems, and psychological resilience is considered a function of a person's capacity for connection (Covington, 2007; Jordan, 2005a). Thus, encouraging individuals' capacity for connection may be a component of strengths-based programming, which intends to enhance individuals' resilience (Maton et al. 2004). Further incorporating Relational Cultural Theory into strengths-based programming, as was the case for The Council, relationships may be viewed as a primary mechanism by which individuals recognize and maximize their capacities, build new personal assets, and enhance their social environments. The development of individuals' strengths would theoretically occur by fostering the types of relationships specified by the Relational Cultural Theory.

The major components of the Relational Cultural Theory include mutual engagement and mutual empathy as the bases for development (Edwards & Richards, 2002; West, 2005). Practice informed by the Relational Cultural approach is rooted in the idea that development, including the development of resilience and adaptability, takes place in the context of mutually empathic, growth-fostering relationships (Comstock et al., 2008, p. 279). The tenets of the Relational Cultural Theory include the following:

people grow through and toward relationships; mutual empathy and empowerment are crucial characteristics of growth-fostering relationships; the ability to participate in increasingly complex and diverse relational networks characterizes growth; all parties in growth-fostering relationships benefit from their participation; mutual empathy is a vehicle for change (Comstock et al., 2008; Jordan, 2000). The provision of, and mutual engagement in, empathy is clearly at the heart of the helping process within Relational Cultural Theory (Freedberg, 2007) because empathy serves not just as a means of knowing another's subjective experience, but also as a way to experience connectedness by simultaneously engaging in another's emotional experience along with them (Jordan, 2000). As discussed previously, individuals' experiential similarity shapes their ability to empathize with one another (Hakansson & Montgomery, 2003), such that group members who have more common will be better equipped to experience connection, and therefore change.

Additionally, the socio-cultural contexts in which individuals exist are imbued with power differentials, which result from the intersections of socio-economic status, race, age, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other forms of difference, and which shape individuals' worldviews. Even in empathetic communication, another person's disclosures are filtered through one's own worldview, which influences how these disclosures are understood (Freedberg, 2007). While empathy may be established through engagement at the emotional level, living another person's socio-cultural context, or something similar, may provide additional insight into their emotional experiences, facilitating the rapid establishment of intense mutual empathy.

To summarize, the Relational Cultural Theory, which guided the development of The Council, is largely rooted in the importance of empathy (Freedberg, 2007; Jordan, 2000; Jordan, 2005a; West 2005) as a means of generating change. In order to broach salient topics, empathy with which would be meaningful and impacting, individuals must experience a high degree of emotional safety. Similarity not only helps to generate emotional safety, but it also enables mutual empathy (Hakansson & Montgomery, 2003) once personal and emotionally charged conversations are begun. Thus, from the perspective of the Relational Cultural Theory, change is a function of similarity to others, such that those youth who are more similar to their groups presumably engage in mutual empathy more readily, increasing their propensity for change. This contrasts with Self-Attention theory, which may also explain patterns of similarity, safety, and change observed in Council participants.



*Self-Attention Theory.* According to the Council program model, one of the program's resources is the diversity of values that its participants bring to their groups. The model demonstrates that participants benefit from sharing their diverse views and perspectives, and exposing each other to new ways of managing challenges and making decisions, as well as new and different perceptions of masculinity. While similarity may enable participants to better engage in mutual empathy, which would facilitate change through the lens of Relational Cultural Theory, there is room in the Council model for participants' differences to contribute to change. Self-Attention Theory (Mullen, 1983, 1986) may explain how groups of diverse participants may facilitate change in behaviors and belief systems.

Self-Attention Theory (Mullen, 1983, 1986) posits that individuals undergo the greatest change when they are in the minority within a group of others. According to Self-Attention Theory, individuals' self-awareness increases as they become more of a minority within a group, becoming more concerned with adhering to the group's norms and standards of behavior as the size of their subgroup decreases (Mullen, 1983, 1986). Those who perceive themselves as different from the rest of their group, with regard to salient characteristics, become increasingly self-attentive and conscious of the attributes that distinguish them from the others (Mullen, 1983). As group members become more self-attentive, they grow increasingly concerned with matching to the attitudinal and behavioral standards of the group, even if those attitudes and behaviors are the source of difference (Mullen, 1983). The likelihood of these self-attention-induced attempts to match to groups' standards can be predicted by the ratio of group members that an

individual perceives to be different from themselves to the total number of group members (Mullen, 1983). As an individual's subgroup becomes proportionately smaller, their degree of self-attention increases (Mullen, 1983), making them more concerned with discrepancies between their own tendencies and salient standards of attitudes and behavior within the group (Mullen, 1986). Conversely, members of the larger subgroup become less self-attentive, as they are made less aware of potential differences between themselves and the rest of the group, and therefore less concerned with matching to attitudinal and behavioral standards (Mullen, 1986). Council participants who are similar to the other members of their group at baseline may be less aware of their own attitudes and behaviors, and therefore less likely to examine them, while youth who identify as different from others in their group may experience change in their behaviors and belief systems at the outcome as they consider the ways in which they are different from their fellow participants.

Decreased self-awareness may also result from being rejected, because individuals may enjoy self-reflection when they feel positively about themselves, but avoid self-awareness after instances of social rejection (Hartling, 2007). Thus, Relational Cultural Theory and Self-Attention Theory may not stand completely in opposition, in that emotional safety is a prerequisite for change in the context of both theories: an individual in either the majority or the minority within their group may resist self-awareness and self-reflection as a result of experiencing a lack of emotional safety, preventing them from undergoing attitudinal or behavior change. However, individuals who are dissimilar to other youth in their group at baseline may undergo changes in their

behaviors and belief systems merely as a result of thinking about their differences, so long as they experience sufficient emotional safety. Those who do not identify great differences between themselves and others in their groups, on the other hand, would not likely engage in as much self-attention, and their change may be more contingent upon participation in mutual empathy. The specific dimensions of similarity and difference that are considered in this thesis, and the reasons why each of them may resonate with youth in The Council, are described in the following sections.

### **Dimensions of Similarity**

For the purposes of this study, similarity will be considered with regard to age, ethnicity, living situation, and baseline attitudes and behaviors on measures assessing the constructs that The Council intends to address. The implications of each of these dimensions of similarity and difference for The Council's functioning are elaborated in the sections that follow.

*Age.* Age is a potentially salient dimension of similarity among group members as age may serve as a proxy for developmental stage. During adolescence, when physical and social development progress more rapidly than at many other points in the life-course (Berk, 2005), age differences may be a source of intimidation, compromising perceptions of safety, and may influence the contents and level of conversation.

Because of the correlation between age and life experience, age may be perceived as an indicator of authority, with participants in the later stages of adolescence being viewed as wiser, more knowledgeable, and generally more experienced than same-age or younger adolescents. With age comes the increased potential of having engaged in sexual

experiences, which Lippitt, Polansky and Rosen (1952) considered a potential contributor to power differentials among adolescent males. In juvenile corrections facilities, where the power structure among inmates is largely determined by physical toughness (Abrams, Anderson-Nathe & Aguilar, 2008), the relationship between age and physical development may account for potential power differentials among adolescents.

Age may represent the type and magnitude of youth's previous social interactions, the genders of their peer interaction partners, and the social and physical contexts in which many of their previous interactions are likely to have occurred (Urberg, 2000), shaping participants' frames of references, topics of interest for conversation and help-seeking, interaction styles, and identity development (Smetana et al., 2006). Age is also a likely determinant of the amount of time that youth have spent in the school system, determining the amount and type of pressures that they have experienced from educators and their attitudes towards education, which may come up in conversation.

The level of conversation achieved in Council groups may depend upon individual members' self-awareness, which also develops with age. A major task of adolescence is identity development (Erikson, 1968), and youth of different ages may be at different points in the process of reconciling their identities. McLean, Breen and Fournier (2010) asked 146 adolescent males from the Toronto area to write about four autobiographical memories: a high point, a low point, a turning point, and a continuing experience, and coded the responses for autonomy/connectedness, self-event connections, and sophistication of meaning. Meaning making, or the ability to reflect on past and present experiences in relation to the present and future self, was found to increase

linearly with age (McLean, Breen & Fournier, 2010). In adolescence, the self-system develops more rapidly as a result of the emergence of new cognitive structures (Fischer, 1980; McLean et al., 2010), and adolescents begin to perceive themselves in terms of multiple differentiated role-related selves (Harter & Monsour, 1992). All of these age-related changes are likely influential shaping youths' self-confidence, sense of self, and ability to reflect on and effectively discuss their pasts, present selves, and futures.

***Race/Ethnicity.*** Race/ethnicity may also be a salient dimension of similarity, as a result of its influence on youths' life experiences. A correlation exists between ethnic group and exposure to community violence (Garbarino, Hammond, Mery & Yung, 2004). Language usage determines whether students receive English as a Second Language education, which is a distinct educational experience (Gonzales, Knight, Birman & Siroli, 2004). The size and function of family networks, family interdependence, family obligations, and parenting styles also vary by ethnic group (Fuligni, Tseng & Lam, 1999; Phinney, Kim-Jo, Osorio, & Vilhjaldsdottir, 2005), and the experiences associated with being an ethnic minority in the United States have been identified as distinctly stressful, as well as generative of a variety of protective processes (Harrison-Hale, McLoyd, & Smedley, 2004). Individuals from different racial and ethnic backgrounds face unique ecological circumstances, such as the pervasive influences of racism, prejudice, discrimination, and oppression, which often create segregated environments (Garcia Coll et al., 1996). The interplay of social position, racism, and segregation, which are collectively responsible for social stratification, create unique conditions that affect the social interactions and developmental processes that operate within these contexts and the skills and competencies that result (Garcia Coll et al., 1996).

***Living Situation.*** Individuals' family structures and previous living situations may also create circumstances that factor heavily into youth's life histories, influencing the range of topics that they wish to discuss, and their ability to do so.

The constellation of relatives with whom an adolescent has resided may be indicative of other life-altering circumstances that result in these family structures (e.g.

death, divorce, or abandonment, parental substance abuse, victimization or perpetration of physical or sexual violence, suffering from emotional or neurological disorders that render them incapable of parenting, HIV-positive status, enrollment in drug treatment programs, or incarceration, etc.) (Pinson-Millburn, Fabian, Schlossberg & Pyle, 1996). There is a great deal of variation in the reasons that youth live in single-parent homes or are cared for by foster parents to whom they are or are not biologically related, and the circumstances surrounding these situations are often more influential in children's lives than the living situations themselves (Pinson-Millburn et al., 1996). As a result, similarity in previous living situations may not be representative of very salient similarities among youth, as the circumstances that created those situations may be the more salient than the living situations themselves.

However, family structure does have implications for adolescents' likelihood of having lived in poverty, which generates a distinct range of experiences in and of itself. Growing up in a female-headed household increases the risk of poverty (McLanahan, 1985), as does being in kinship care (in the custody of biological family other than one's parents) as opposed to non-kin foster care (Ehrle & Green, 2002). Children and adolescents in the custody of non-parental family members, as opposed to non-familial foster parents, experience higher rates of poverty and food insecurity, and are more likely to live with an unmarried guardian who is unemployed, without a high school degree, and who has lower expectations of receiving social services (Ehrle & Green, 2002).

Having lived in a group home is indicative of a distinctive history of delinquency: children and youth who are placed in group homes often have severe behavioral problems

and tendencies towards delinquency, are considered dangers towards themselves, and have already had contact with the juvenile justice system before their placement in group homes, which typically serve juvenile offenders and children and youth with severe behavioral problems (Breland-Noble, Farmer, Dubs, Potter & Burns, 2005).

Adolescents' psychological profiles, which likely shape the content and quality of group discussions, are also influenced by the constellation of adults with whom they have lived. Examining a sample of 15,428 9<sup>th</sup> graders from Stockholm, Jablonska and Lindberg (2007) found that adolescents living with single fathers were at a greater risk of exposure to bullying and physical violence, anxiety, depression, and aggressive behavior than those living with single mothers or in two-parent homes. Compared to children and adolescents in non-kin foster care, those in the care of non-parental family members displayed greater overall competence and fewer overall problem behaviors, greater social competence, fewer social problems, less withdrawn behavior, and fewer thought and attention problems (Keller et al., 2001), indicating that placement with other family is a distinctively different experience from living with non-familial foster parents.

The sequence of being in foster care and then returning to one's biological family also appears to be a distinctive experience. Youth who were in foster care for at least five months and then reunited with their families showed more self-destructive behavior, substance use, and total risk behavior, and were more likely to have received a ticket or been arrested, to have dropped out of school, to have received lower grades, and to report more current problems with internalizing behaviors, total behavior problems, and lower



total competence than those children who were not reunited with their biological families (Tuassing, Clyman & Landsverk, 2001).

Educational achievement and orientation also tend to vary by family situation. Children who live with single parents or stepparents during adolescence receive less encouragement and less help with school work than children who live with both biological parents, and parental involvement has positive effects on children's school achievement (Astone & McLanahan, 1991). A nationally representative sample of 8<sup>th</sup> graders from 1988 National Longitudinal Study, including 409 children in the care of single fathers, 3,483 in the care of single mothers and 14,269 residing in biological two-parent families, found that children from single-father and single-mother families perform roughly the same in school, though both are outperformed by children from two-parent families (Downey, 1994). In the case of children raised by single mothers, relatively poor school performance is often due to a lack of economic resources, while the academic performance of those in the care of single fathers may be attributed to a lack of interpersonal parental resources (Downey, 1994).

Nearly a quarter of children in kinship foster care fall above the cutoff for academic difficulty or failure (Keller et al., 2001). Children in foster care are more likely to transfer schools, and experience delays in transferring schools, than children who are not in foster care (Cogner & Finkelstein, 2003). Compared to children and youth from similar socio-economic backgrounds who are not involved in the foster care system, those in foster care generally have lower academic performance, due to distractions that result from concerns about maintaining ties to biological parents and caring for siblings,

absences caused by mandated court appearances and doctors' appointments, behavioral problems potentially rooted in the circumstances that led to the foster care situation, and the avoidance of peer interactions in order to keep their foster care status secret (Finkelstein, Wamsley & Miranda, 2002). Interviews with 25 children in the foster care system in the Bronx revealed tremendous anxiety and reluctance associated with disclosing their foster care status to their classmates, for fear of being labeled as a "foster child" and losing their ability to maintain a sense of privacy, and embarrassment about the events at the root of their involvement in the foster care system (Finkelstein, Wamsley & Miranda, 2002). Thus, other youth who have also been in foster care may provide one of the first and most profoundly emotionally safe peer audiences for discussing issues associated with the experience.

Age, ethnic identity, and previous living situation are all topics that seem likely to arise in conversation within Council groups; they may be the explicit topic of conversation, or shape the content or form of discussions about other subjects. Their salience to individual group members may vary as well: youth who feel that their life experiences have made them older beyond their years, or who feel younger, or smaller, or less experienced than their peers may be especially attuned to their group members' ages. Participants who differentially identify with their ethnicity are likely differentially aware of, and affected by others' cultural identifications. Youth who have never felt alienated because of living situation may be relatively unaffected by similarity along this dimension, compared to those who are sensitive about their familial histories and the circumstances that they have generated. The safety resulting from similarity along

measures of age, ethnicity, and prior living situation is bound to differ from participant to participant, and therefore from group to group, based on their composition and the issues of greatest importance to their members.

*Baseline behaviors and belief systems.* Group members' initial behaviors and beliefs regarding the focal topics of group meetings may also be influential sources of perceived similarity or difference among them. Given that much of the present strengths-based program is dedicated to sharing perspectives about these behaviors and belief systems, group members' initial similarity in this area would seem likely to determine the discourse that occurs within each group, influencing the extent to which the discussion-oriented program is implemented as intended.

Attitudinal similarity may also be influential in determining the emotional safety in any social situation, and particularly so when the situation exists primarily to enable the exchange of ideas regarding those attitudes. Friends generally appear more similar than non-friends, due to attraction that results from pre-existing similarities (Altermatt & Pomerantz, 2003). Self-disclosure is most satisfying and beneficial when it occurs between peers who share similar views with respect to issues of fundamental importance to them (Youniss & Smollar, 1985), and higher perceived similarity regarding attitude, background, values, and appearance is predictive of feeling good, safe, and less uncertainty in social situations (Prisbell & Anderson, 1980).

That said, specific behaviors and belief systems are likely to differ in their salience to Council participants. Not all behavioral patterns and belief systems discussed in The Council may be of equal importance to participants, or arise in conversation as

frequently or intensely as others. Certain topics may be more salient or emotionally charged than others, such that greater initial similarity of opinion regarding some behaviors and belief systems may contribute to overall feelings of emotional safety to a greater extent than others. Existing similarity in behaviors and beliefs that more closely reflect a participant's values are likely more influential in shaping their experience of emotional safety than those topics that do not resonate with them very deeply. Therefore, not all behaviors and belief systems measured in The Council evaluation may be expected to equally determine participants' experiences of emotional safety.

Identifying the specific demographic characteristics and behaviors and belief systems that correspond most closely to feelings of emotional safety may help Council facilitators and administrators to create groups that are the most potentially conducive to emotional safety. Seeing as the logistics would likely be quite difficult to match participants to groups on the basis of multiple demographic characteristics and behaviors and belief systems, it could be practically useful to know which one characteristic is most influential in creating emotional safety.

While age, ethnicity, previous living situation, and current behaviors and belief systems create relevant differences among adolescents in the general population, adolescent males in juvenile corrections are a distinct subset of teenagers, due to the intersection of their age and gender, the time that they have spent in the unique context of juvenile corrections, and life events that are common among juvenile offenders. These features, which differentiate incarcerated adolescent males from the rest of the population, are discussed in the following sections.

### **Incarcerated Adolescent Males**

*Adolescent masculinity.* Robert Brannon (1985) has identified four themes in traditional American masculinity: antifemininity, success and achievement, inexpressiveness and independence, and adventurousness and aggressiveness. According to O'Neil and colleagues (1986), men often experience conflict in four domains of their lives, as a result of endorsing these themes and complying with pressures to adhere to these guidelines for masculine behavior, which inherently generate negative consequences for themselves and others in their lives (Stillson, O'Neil, & Owen, 1991). These gender role conflicts take the form of striving for success, power, and competition, restrictive emotionality, restricted affection towards other men, and conflict between work and family relations (O'Neil, Helms, Gable, David & Wrightsman, 1986).

Though measures of gender role conflict were initially developed for and administered to adult men, adolescent boys embody traditional male ideologies as well, taking the form of the "boy code" (Blazina, Pisecco & O'Neil, 2005). In an early comparison of the gender role conflict experienced by younger and older men, age was not identified as a predictor of the magnitude or form of the conflict (O'Neil et al., 1991), implying that adolescent males encounter the same conflicts as their more senior counterparts. However, a more recent study of gender role conflict in adolescent males found that younger men tended to experience more gender role conflict than adults, with the exception of conflicts related to tension between work and family (Watts & Borders, 2005).

As a result of gender role conflict in the domains of restricted emotionality and affection towards other males, adolescent men experience less closeness, affection, nurturance, trust, security, validation, and acceptance in their friendships than teenage women (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). This characteristic lack of supportive relationships among of boys and young men (Rose & Rudolf, 2006) tends to lead to a dismissal or denial of their true relational strengths, sensitivity to interpersonal dynamics, and attunement to others' thoughts and feelings (Chu, 1998). Strengths-based intervention programs with strong emphases on relational community building, which aim to enhance pre-existing strengths while normalizing and encouraging open displays and discussion of emotionality and interpersonal connection, may therefore be especially beneficial for incarcerated young men.

*Adolescents in juvenile corrections.* Adolescent males' endorsement of masculine ideology has also been linked to school suspensions, repeating grades in school, drinking, using drugs, engaging in sexual behavior with higher numbers of partners and getting arrested (Blazina et al., 2005). Given that all of the young men in juvenile correctional facilities were arrested, potentially for crimes involving drugs, and are likely behind their peers academically, it is reasonable to expect that they endorse masculine ideologies to a greater extent than the general population of American adolescent males. Additionally, previous research on programs designed to help institutionalized adolescent men transition back into their communities identified three gender-related themes pertinent to the young men's circumstances: (1) a lack of consistent role models, which led many of the youth to view risk-taking behavior as normal masculine behavior, (2) the belief that society would consider them failures if they did not attain good jobs, cars, and a nice house, and (3) definitions of masculinity that were grounded in behaviors as opposed to emotional traits (Lloyd, Williams & Sullivan, 2004). These themes reflect a relatively strong endorsement of traditional masculinity, indicating high levels of gender role conflict (O'Neil, 1986).

Rose and Rudolph (2006) have proposed that interactions with same-sex peers contribute to the development of sex-typed relationship styles, which in turn shape boys' and girls' emotional and behavioral development, and decrease their susceptibility to the influences of other-gender peers, leading them to identify with traditional gender roles. Young men in juvenile corrections are constantly in the presence of their same-gender peers, and are prevented from interacting with young women. As a result, this population

may be prone to increasingly endorsing the traditional male gender role over the course of their incarceration, at a faster rate than young men who also interact with women on a regular basis.

Individuals held in correctional facilities are not encouraged to form emotional connections with one another, and the development of close bonds is often actively discouraged (Covington, 2007). A 2008 ethnographic study of juvenile detention centers by Abrams, Anderson-Nathe and Aguilar found evidence of systematic and institutionalized attempts to minimize emotionality: the physical environments were “overwhelmingly masculine,” arranged in such a way as to preclude relational engagement (p. 31), implying an institutional belief that focused, prolonged, and involved conversation among young men superfluous, rare, and something to be discouraged. The nature and tone of permitted leisure activities, and the type and organization of physical recreational time were devoid of opportunities for relational discourse (Abrams et al., 2008), indicating that the institutions do not recognize the need for, or legitimacy of, emotional engagement among the adolescent males that they detain.

Correctional facilities in general are known for the hierarchical structures formed by the inmates therein, and juvenile detention centers are no exception. The extent to which young men exemplify hegemonic masculinity, defined as rugged individualism, stoicism, and competition, is the primary measure that determines how incarcerated boys and men rank, and the amount of power that they wield relative to others in their correctional facilities (Cesaroni & Alvi, 2010). Power differentials among detainees are enacted largely through the infliction of physical and sexual violence, psychological



intimidation, threats, and constant bullying on those that do not make their hegemonic masculinity widely known as early or fervently as others (Cesaroni & Alvi, 2010).

*Incarcerated youth prior to incarceration.* The psychological histories of adolescent males held in juvenile detention almost always indicate family trauma. Hughes (1998) examined self reports from a racially and ethnically diverse sample of 20 inner-city men, aged 18 to 27, finding that the majority of them had experienced absent parents, perilous environments that required the development of survival techniques, and a shortage of play, laughter, pleasurable experiences, and feelings of security, love, and worth. Self reports, observations, and interviews with 34 adolescent felons and their mothers and younger siblings revealed that these mother-adolescent-sibling triads engage in significantly more conflict than families of non-offender adolescents, and that families of juvenile felons are more likely to end their conflicts through submission, as opposed to families of well-adjusted youth, who are more likely to end their conflicts with standoffs (Schaefer & Borduin, 1999).

According to an analysis of official files and records of individual and group psychotherapy sessions of 43 juvenile felons in a California state prison, over half of the participants had anti-social, anti-authority values, admittedly did not know how to be anything other than a criminal, were members of a minority group, and belonged to a gang (Eisenman, 1993). Many, although not all of the participants, had parents who were often either criminals themselves, or less than totally law-abiding (Eisenman, 1993), and a majority of incarcerated adolescents have been exposed to neighborhood violence (Martin, Sigda, & Kupersmidt, 1998). Of the 218 incarcerated adolescent males with

whom Abrantes and colleagues (2005) conducted interviews, over 75% were at least 15 years of age, though only 62% of them had passed the 9<sup>th</sup> grade in school; upwards of 80% of adolescents held in juvenile detention centers display symptoms of conduct disorder (Abrantes, 2005), and as of 1999, over half of the children known to the child welfare system in Sacramento County had been arrested for juvenile offenses (Grayson, 1999).

Physical and/or sexual victimization is quite common among adolescents in the juvenile justice system (Brezina, 1998; Eisenman, 1993; Heck & Walsh, 2000; Kaufman & Widon, 1999), with approximately 28% of adolescents in juvenile detention centers reporting having been physically abused, 12% reporting sexual abuse, and 27% reporting emotional abuse (Abrantes, 2005), though some studies have found rates of physical, psychological, or sexual abuse to be as high as 50% among juvenile felons (Eisenmann, 1993).

The mental health of adolescents in juvenile detention centers tends to be precarious as well. In an examination of 178 children incarcerated in North Carolina, over 70% displayed depressive symptoms (Martin, Sigda, & Kupersmidt, 1998). Abrantes (2005) also reports that 33% of incarcerated adolescent males have a history of suicidal ideation, 25% have previously attempted suicide, with 18% having made multiple prior attempts, and 24% have experienced major depressive episodes.

A consequence of detaining adolescent offenders is its conduciveness to its residents spreading their antisocial influence among themselves. Intervention programs with pro-social goals and the intention of deterring participants from criminal behavior

actually enabled “deviancy training,” a process by which more seasoned delinquent participants spread their knowledge and tendency towards illicit behavior to other adolescent participants (Dishion, McCord and Poulin, 1999). Males who are the most delinquent, as would be expected of those who are incarcerated, and have the poorest relationships appear to be the most susceptible to deviancy training (Poulin, Dishion, and Haas, 1999). Taken together, it could be argued that ushering young men in juvenile detention centers into small discussion groups to meet on a weekly basis would do more harm than good. However, the young men in correctional facilities are perpetually in each other’s company and are thus potentially exposed to deviancy training regardless of their participation in The Council. Further, because Council groups are facilitated by at least one adult, who serves as a moderator and maintains some degree of authority, attending Council sessions may reduce time and situations that could otherwise be used for transmitting delinquent ideologies and strategies.

Considering the stressful context of juvenile corrections, and the distinguishing factors that differentiate incarcerated adolescent males from the general population, it may be argued that these youth have the most to gain from well-crafted and rigorously implemented strengths-based programming, the success of which may depend upon the creation of emotionally safe group environments. Grouping together young men who are similar to each other in salient ways likely increases their feelings of emotional safety in each other’s presence, by freeing them from shaming and blaming, increasing their willingness to approach others for help, enabling positive and respectful regard for one another, enhancing their sense of community, and encouraging group cohesion. From the

perspective of the Relational Cultural Theory, which informed the development of The Council, emotional safety is crucial for individuals to undergo positive change, as is the process of engaging in mutual empathy, which is also contingent upon similarity of experience. While Self-Attention Theory posits that change is more likely to occur in the presence of dissimilar others, emotional safety is still required for individuals to reflect on themselves, in order to begin positively changing their patterns of behaviors and beliefs. Even in the context of Self-Attention Theory, then, similarity at baseline will enable positive change within members of relational communities to the extent that it generates emotional safety. Similarity along the dimensions of age, ethnicity, previous living situation, and baseline measures of the behaviors and belief systems that shape the conversation of Council groups may be particularly relevant in illuminating the process of positive change that incarcerated male youths may undergo during their participation in The Council.

Identifying a significant positive relationship between Council participants' similarity to their group members and their experiences of safety may contribute to the existing evidence of attraction to, and safety in the presence of, similar others (Altermatt & Pomerantz, 2003; Cartwright, 1968; Frost 1996; McMillan, 1996; Sullivan, 1953). Detecting differential contributions of similarity regarding various demographic characteristics and baseline behaviors and belief systems to feelings of safety may have revealed which individual characteristics youth in The Council consider most salient. Sex, ethnicity, and age group have been described as the "Big Three" characteristics upon which individuals categorize and stereotype others (Fiske, 1998), but in all-male groups

of adolescents, it is unclear how these features may influence judgments. It is possible that whether youth consider the demographic characteristics or behaviors and belief systems of their peers most influential in determining how safe they feel depends on their previous life experience: demographic similarity may be a determinant of safety for youth who feel that their previous experiences have been strongly influenced by their demographic profile, while those who have not been as aware of how their demography has shaped their experiences may view behaviors and belief systems as more salient determinants of similarity. Sinclair and Kunda (1999; as cited in Quinn, Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2003) found that individuals consider others' multiple, simultaneous group memberships, such as those based on age, ethnicity, and life experience, in accordance with their own nuanced motivational states, which likely vary as a function of previous experience.

Additionally, while enactment and discussions of behaviors and belief systems are intended to comprise much of what occurs during Council sessions, thereby focusing on similarities and differences in these domains, initial judgments of safety are more likely to be based on others' immediately visible characteristics, which would correspond more closely to age, ethnicity, and living situation. In order for groups to broach the subjects of behaviors and belief systems, it may be necessary for members to experience emotional safety first, leaving demographic similarity as an initial mechanism for shaping participants' feelings of safety, while similarity in behaviors and belief systems may become more salient determinants of safety once group members begin engaging with these topics.

A significant positive relationship between participants' experiences of safety and their positive changes along measures of behaviors and belief systems may provide evidence of the Relational Cultural Theory at work: the experience of safety may be interpreted as a precursor to disclosure, which enables participation in connection, and therefore generates positive change at the outcome. However, youth who report lower levels of safety may also display positive changes in their behaviors and belief systems, as a function of their self-directed attention. It may be considered support for Self-Attention Theory if safety only partially mediates the relationship between baseline similarity and positive changes in behaviors and belief systems at the outcome.

According to contact theory (Pettigrew, 1998), exposure to different individuals increases knowledge about other social groups, and presumably reduces prejudice. Interacting with people who we perceive as different also forces us to adapt to the novelty of being in the presence of dissimilar individuals, which also serves as a precursor to attitudinal change (Pettigrew, 1998). Positive interactions with people different from one's self also generate more emotional ties with members of other groups (Pettigrew, 1998); diverse Council groups may therefore serve as an initial step towards generating emotional safety in the absence of similarities. Thus, participating in The Council with very different others may have benefits for youth over and above the specific changes assessed in the current study. The potential trade-off between program efficacy and exposure to others with diverse backgrounds and perspectives will have to be carefully assessed by institutions using The Council.

### **Present Study**

***Problem Statement.*** In response to the shared dangers and the unique pressures that emerge from gender-role expectations, advocates have developed gender-specific strengths-based interventions, including Beth Hossfeld and Giovanna Taormina's Council for Boys and Young Men (The Council, 2006) and Girls' Circle (1996). Both programs, which are based on the relational-cultural model (Miller, 1991), and cater to young men and women ages 9 through 18, have served young people from a wide range of backgrounds, and have been implemented across the United States in a variety of settings and contexts, from juvenile detention centers to after-school programs (Dollette et al., 2006; Gray et al., 2008). A preliminary evaluation found significant increases in self-efficacy, ethnic identity, and school engagement among Council participants (Gray et al., 2008), though these studies lacked a comparison or control group from the same setting.

While these evaluations have sought to address the overall efficacy of The Council and Girls' Circle programs, little is known about the features of the individual discussion groups that shape their effectiveness. Specifically, the composition of the discussion groups in relation to their efficacy is yet to be explored, and this information may enable program coordinators and group facilitators to assign boys to groups to maximize their potential for positive change. In training facilitators to conduct Council and Girls' Circle groups, Hossfeld and Taormina emphasize the importance of participants' sense of emotional and intellectual safety within their groups as a prerequisite for change (Hossfeld, Gibraltarik, Bowers & Taormina, 2008; Hossfeld & Taormina, 2007). However, existing evaluations have excluded analyses of the

determinants of participants' feelings of safety, and whether safety exists and is related to participants' positive changes. The main purpose of this thesis is to determine whether the degree of group members' shared experiences influences their perception of safety within their group, and whether this safety corresponds to the desired changes in participants' attitudes and beliefs over the course of their participation in The Council. The overarching questions that the proposed analyses will address is whether there is a relationship between participants' baseline similarity to those in their group and the extent of their reported positive change on measures of their self image and social engagement, masculine ideology, caring and cooperation, ethnic identity, attitudes about continuing criminal behavior, and self efficacy over the course of their involvement in The Council, and whether this relationship is mediated by emotional safety. The measurement model is depicted below in Figure 1 and corresponds to the indicated portions of the program model in Figure 2, below.

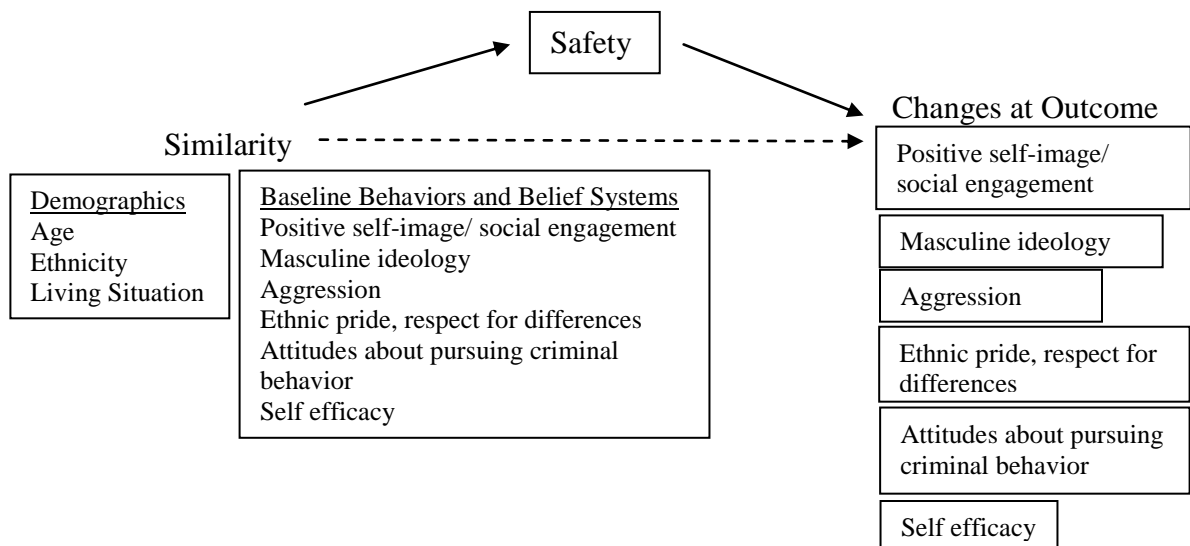


Figure 1. Measurement Model. Experiences of emotional safety are proposed to mediate the relationship between similarity in demographics and behavior and belief systems and changes during The Council.



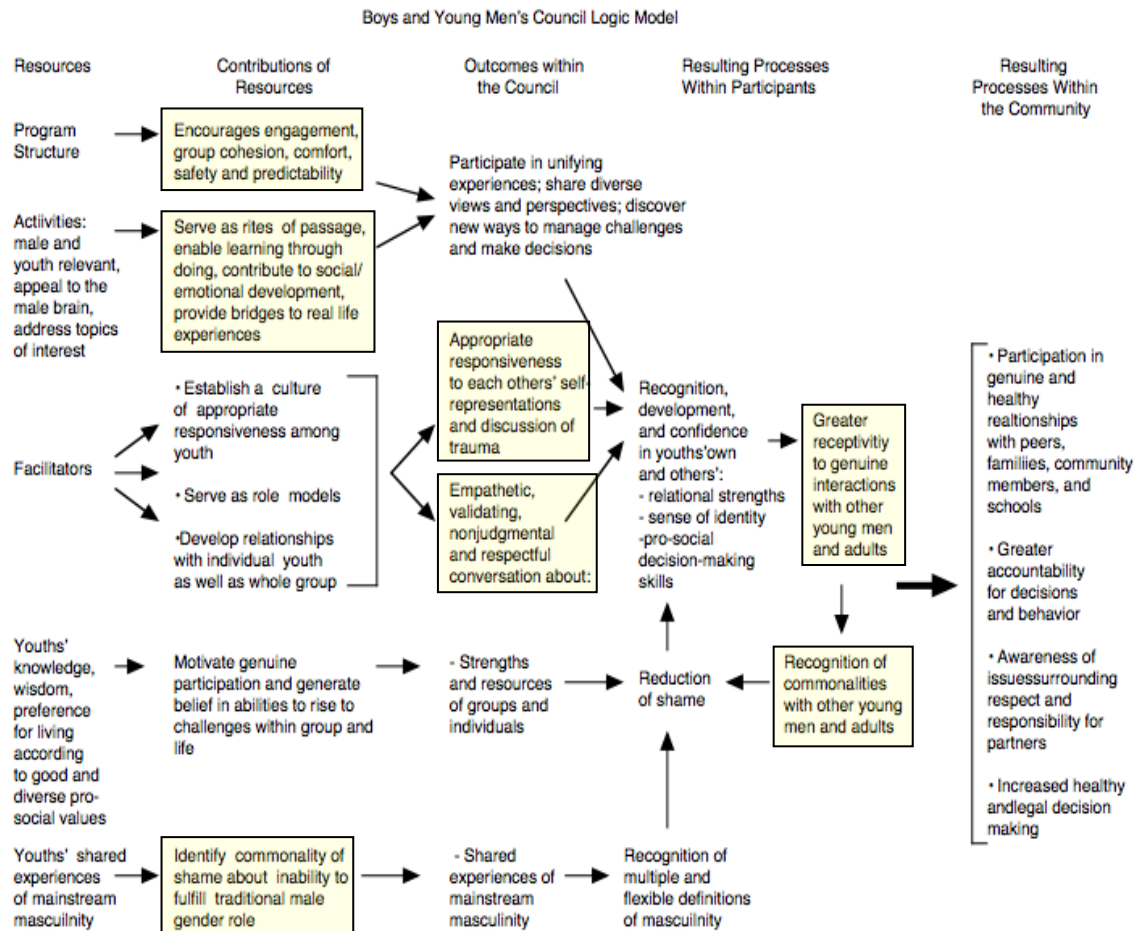


Figure 2. The Council Program Model. The measurement model corresponds to constructs implied within the indicated portions of the model.

**Research question one.** More specifically, the first research question addresses whether participants in The Council reported positive change on the measures of the behaviors and belief systems that the program attempts to alter. I expect that participants' positive self-image and social engagement (H 1.1), masculine ideology (H 1.2), caring and cooperation (H 1.3), ethnic pride and respect for differences (H 1.4),

attitudes about negative consequences of ceasing criminal behavior (H 1.5), beliefs about personal positive consequences of ceasing criminal behavior (H 1.6), beliefs about positive consequences for others of ceasing criminal behavior (H 1.7) and self efficacy (H 1.8) change in a positive direction during the ten weeks between the initial measurement point and the post-program survey administration.

Hypotheses 1.1 – 1.8. There are significant differences between participants' scores on each of the measures of behaviors and belief systems measured prior to beginning The Council and after completing The Council.

*Research question two.* The second research question is whether emotional safety mediates the relationship between baseline similarity and positive changes on each of the measures of behaviors and belief systems at the outcome. I predict that safety mediates the relationship between overall baseline similarity and positive change on measures of positive self-image and social engagement (H 2.1), masculine ideology (H 2.2), caring and cooperation (H 2.3), ethnic pride and respect for differences (H 2.4), attitudes about pursuing criminal behavior (H 2.5), and self efficacy (H 2.6). For each outcome measure, I expect that baseline similarity and participants' change scores are significantly related (H 2.1 – 2.6a), as are participants' baseline dissimilarity scores and their reports of emotional safety (H 2.1- 2.6b). I also expect the relationship between baseline similarity and change scores to attenuate, when emotional safety is considered as a mediator (H 2.1- 2.6c).

For each outcome variable:

Hypothesis 2a. Dissimilarity scores will be significantly predictive of change scores.

Hypothesis 2b. Dissimilarity scores will be significantly predictive of emotional safety.

Hypothesis 2c. Safety will partially mediate the relationship between similarity and change scores.

**Research question three.** The third research question more deeply considers the relationship between similarity and safety. Specifically, I ask how participants' baseline similarity to their fellow group members is related to their experience of safety. Because it is unlikely that Council administrators will be able to assign participants to groups based on an extensive combination of characteristics, it may be practically useful to know which specific dimensions of similarity should be prioritized in assigning youths to groups. I predict that similarity regarding demographic characteristics and baseline measures of behaviors and belief systems will be differentially predictive of safety, though I do not have a hypothesis about which type of similarity will be more predictive of safety (H 3).

Hypothesis 3. Similarity regarding demographic characteristics and baseline measures of behaviors and belief systems will be differentially related to emotional safety.

*Study context.* This thesis utilizes data collected by Dr. Eric Mankowski and his research team at Portland State University between June 2009 and June 2010 at two juvenile correction facilities in Ohio. The ongoing program evaluation project involves four sites, two of which, Ohio River Valley and Circleville Juvenile Correctional Facilities, utilized The Council, a strengths-based program for adolescent males, and two of which, Indian River and Cuyahoga Hills, utilized alternative rehabilitation programs. The current study examines only the data collected from Ohio River Valley and Circleville, where The Council was implemented.

Dr. Mankowski and his team have maintained a community partnership with the authors of The Council curricula over several years, during which time the research team has facilitated data collection and assessment of The Council program in various settings around the country. The following sections provide an overview of the history of The Council's use in the Ohio Department of Youth Services, and descriptions of how The Council is implemented and its theoretical mechanisms.

*Ohio Department of Youth Services.* In December 2004, a class-action lawsuit was brought against the Ohio Department of Youth Services (ODYS), concerning the use of force, seclusion, and sub-par provision of medical, mental health and education services within its facilities (Kruse & Gerhardstein, 2010). A 2008 federally mandated fact-finding mission established that ODYS facilities were notably lacking in their provision of mental health and rehabilitation services, and were characterized by a pervasive culture of violence perpetuated by excessive use of force, by both the youth and facility staff (Cohen, 2008). As part of a larger response to these accusations, ODYS has implemented a strengths-based behavioral-management system for monitoring the youths' behavior in all of their juvenile correctional facilities (Stickrath, 2010), and has begun a trial of The Council at two cities to determine whether the program is an effective means of augmenting their purportedly insufficient rehabilitation programming.

## Method

### Participants

The participants in this study are young men who have attended The Council while being held in either the Ohio River Valley or Circleville Juvenile Correctional Facilities operated by ODYS. Both of these facilities serve youth aged 10 to 21, and specialize in sex offender programming (Juvenile Correctional Facilities, 2010), containing a disproportionate number of young men who have been convicted of sex crimes.

The Ohio River Valley facility implemented The Council from the outset of the fifty-week study, while the Circleville facility functioned as a control site for the first twenty weeks, using an alternative rehabilitation program instead of The Council. After the second data collection point, twenty weeks into the study, ODYS administrators decided to begin conducting The Council in the Circleville facility as well, making it an experimental site for the last thirty weeks of the study. Prior to beginning my data analysis, I combined official records provided by ODYS with the youths' survey data collected by Dr. Mankowski and his research team. Of the 1447 youth who completed at least one survey during their time in ODYS, I was able to match 1210 with records from ODYS, 588 of whom had been living at one of the sites where The Council was administered during at least one of the measurement periods: at Ohio River Valley at any measurement point, or at Circleville at the latter 3 data collection periods. As this thesis seeks exclusively to answer questions about youths' experiences in The Council, this subsample of 588 participants who had theoretically had some exposure to the program was

used to determine the reliability and factor structure of the measurement tools, and the samples used to address the hypotheses were also drawn from this group. Information regarding how participants were organized in Council groups was only available for groups administered at Ohio River Valley. Therefore, data from the 148 participants that were ultimately used for hypothesis testing in this thesis was collected at the Ohio River Valley site. Selection of these 148 participants is described below.

The survey responses of each of the 588 participants who were theoretically exposed to The Council were visually examined to look for patterning in their responses that would indicate haphazard or careless survey completion. If patterning appeared suspicious in the data processor, the paper surveys were pulled and visually inspected by a research assistant and myself. Thirty-eight participants were identified as having completed at least 1 survey that appeared to be lacking in integrity, and those surveys were flagged accordingly in the data file for consideration in identifying participants and measurement points for the creation of dissimilarity scores.

In order to investigate all of the hypotheses specified in this thesis, it was necessary to have data from each participant at two adjacent time points, so that their change on each of the specified outcome measures over the course of a ten-week cycle in The Council could be assessed. Of the 588 participants who had lived at an experimental site, 278 had completed surveys at adjacent measurement points, and 169 completed at least 2 surveys at adjacent measurement points, and according to ODYS records, had participated in The Council at least once during the time between the two surveys. If any of these participants, the focal participants, fit these criteria for multiple measurement

points, the earliest set of surveys was given priority. If either of the surveys framing a window of participation was deemed to be lacking integrity, later series of adjacent time points were selected when possible. Eight focal participants had completed surveys that were deemed lacking integrity and had not completed surveys at any additional measurement points that would have made it possible to include their change over the course of another 10-week cycle, resulting in 161 potential focal participants. Of these 161 potential focal participants, 13 were the only youth in their group who had official attendance greater than 0 and who had completed a survey that was considered to have integrity. Therefore, dissimilarity scores were only attempted for the 148 participants who had other group members with whom they could be compared. Each of these 148 participants were then compared to the other youth who had been present in their Council group and had completed a survey at the earlier of the measurement points, during the window of time surrounded by their adjacent surveys.

The 148 participants whose data was ultimately used for hypothesis testing were aged 15.8 to 21.2 ( $M = 18.4$ ,  $sd = 1.2$ ) on September 14, 2010 (see Table 1 for demographic characteristics of the sample). Approximately 70% of the sample self-identified as African American and 15.5% as White, with the remaining 14.5% identifying as Asian, Latino, Native American, or “other”. Of the 145 focal participants who responded to the item about their experience with group homes/foster homes, 31.1% reported that they had lived in such situations, while the remaining 69.9% indicated that they had never lived in either a group home or a foster home. In response to the question “who did you most recently live with before you came to Ohio Youth Services?,” 52.7%



of the focal participants indicated that they had been living with their mother, 10.8% responded that they had been living with someone other than their parents, other family members, foster parents, or in a group home, and 8.1% each reported that they had been living with their father or both their mother and father. The remaining 20.3% had been living with other family members, foster parents, or in a group home. Forty-eight percent of the focal participants were serving time for a level-1 felony, which is considered the most severe felony level, followed by 22.3% who were serving time for a level-2 felony (the second most severe level), and 14.2% who had been found guilty of a level-3 felony. Ten (6.8%) and 11 (7.4%) participants were serving their sentences for level-4 and level-5 felonies, respectively (the least severe categories of felony), and 2 of the focal participants were incarcerated for murder.

The focal participants had, on average, spent 814.19 ( $sd = 385.83$ ,  $min = 48$ ,  $max = 1928$ ) days in ODYS prior to completing the first of the surveys that were used to assess their change. They had attended an average of 15.32 hours of The Council ( $sd = 5.32$ ) during the time between their focal survey completions, and had between 1 and 16 other youth in their Council groups ( $M = 7.16$ ,  $sd = 3.81$ ).

Table 1. *Distributions of Ethnicity, Previous Living Situations and Felony Level*

Variable	Distribution (approx)	n
Ethnicity		
White	15.5%	23
Asian	0.7%	1
Latino	2%	3
Native American	2%	3
African American	69.6%	103
Other	4.7%	7
Multi-racial	5.4%	8
Total	~100%	148
Group Home or Foster Home		
Yes	31.1%	46
No	66.9%	99
Total	~98%	145
Most Recently Lived with		
Mother Only	52.7%	78
Father Only	8.1%	12
Mother and Father	8.1%	12
Other Family	6.8%	10
Foster Parent	4.7%	7
Group Home	2%	3
Other	10.8%	16
Multiple Responses	6.1%	9
Total	~99.3%	147
Felony Level		
1	48%	71
2	22.3%	33
3	14.2%	21
4	6.8%	10
5	7.4%	11
Murder	1.4%	2
Total	~100%	148

## Procedure

Before The Council was initiated within ODYS, an initial group of staff from the Ohio River Valley correctional facility were trained by Council representatives in the program's intended implementation. Dr. Mankowski also traveled to the facility to train the program facilitators to administer the surveys. Specifically, staff received training on how to ensure the security and confidentiality of the surveys and how to address

participating youths' questions about the research. The facilitators were given some background information about The Council program, its history and purpose, and practiced the survey administration protocol. One ODYS administrator who was present for this initial training subsequently trained facilitators to administer surveys at the Circleville Correctional Facility, using the same training materials.

Prior to the first session of The Council, group facilitators read aloud a script written by the research team, introducing the youth to the study. The youth were informed of the intention of the study, the nature of the questions that would be asked, and that only the research team would see their responses and that their participation was voluntary. They were also provided with a page of information about the purpose of the study and asked to sign and return one copy of the informed consent document (see Appendix B) and keep a copy for themselves if they agreed to participate. Because the youth were in the custody of ODYS, it was not necessary to obtain consent from their legal guardians. Prior to agreeing to complete the surveys, some youth were informed that they would receive a candy bar as a thank you for their participation. Group facilitators were also asked to complete questionnaires after every 10 weeks of facilitating a group that assessed which Council curriculum they used with their groups, as well as the number of group sessions attended by each participant. After collecting the young men's informed consent forms, the facilitators read aloud another script written by the research team, elaborating on the content of the surveys and the importance of responding honestly. Surveys were then distributed, and the facilitators read aloud each question and answer choice, to enable young men with limited reading comprehension to

follow along and complete the survey with the rest of their group. Participants then placed their completed surveys in a manila envelope which was sealed by the last young man to complete his survey, or sealed their individual completed surveys in letter-sized envelopes which were then collected by the facilitator.

Immediately following completion of the initial surveys, each group began their first of the ten prescribed Council sessions. The procedure was repeated ten weeks later, following the completion of the tenth Council session and then again ten weeks later, after the completion of the twentieth meeting of The Council. The latter two versions of the survey included a measure of the participants' satisfaction with their previous participation in the program, as well as three open-ended questions regarding their experience in The Council.

### **Design**

The original program evaluation took the form of a longitudinal quasi-experimental design, however, the present study is observational, in that all of the participants involved received The Council. Additionally, the movement of youth between facilities in ODYS is far more fluid than was anticipated at the outset of the study, and communication with ODYS administration indicated that the youth who had been most disruptive were often moved to the Ohio River Valley facility, creating a nonrandom grouping of participants.

### **Measures**

The surveys administered at each of the five time points were identical, with the exception of additional items measuring the youths' satisfaction with The Council and

open ended questions regarding their reactions to the program which were included in the surveys administered during the latter four time points. The surveys (see Appendix C) included measures of demographic information, qualities of the young men's positive self-image and social engagement, masculine ideology, caring and cooperation, ethnic pride and respect for differences, attitudes about pursuing criminal behavior, and self efficacy, in addition to program satisfaction, including reports of safety, in later surveys.

**Demographic characteristics.** A distribution of all of the original 588 participants' ages on Sept. 14, 2010, as indicated in their ODYS records, was examined to identify 7 clusters of youth. Youths' ages were recoded, from the continuous variable specifying their age on a given date, to the age cluster in which they fell. Four items assessing demographic information were included in the surveys distributed to the youth to assess their racial/ethnic identity, who they had lived with most recently before entering ODYS, and whether they had ever lived in a foster home or group home. Regarding race/ethnicity, youth were given the response options of "White," "Asian," "Latino/-a," "Native American," "African American," and "Other," and provided with a space to write in their racial/ethnic identity if they wished. In terms of whom the youth had lived with prior to entering ODYS, they were provided with the response options of "mother," "father," "mother and father," "other family," "foster parent," "group home," and "Other," with the option to write in a different response. In response to the question "Have you ever lived in a foster home or group home?," youth were asked to circle "yes," "no," and "not sure." Similarity to group members was calculated for each participant, along each of the measures of demographics and behaviors and belief systems. These

scores reflect youths' similarity to the other members of the Council group with whom they had just participated for ten weeks prior to completing their latter survey. Group members whose surveys at the focal measurement point were deemed to be lacking integrity were not included in the calculation of dissimilarity scores, and neither were group members with a recorded attendance of 0 for that cycle.

Each focal participant's demographic profile was systematically compared to each of their group members'. For each of the 4 categorical variables that were used to create the demographic dissimilarity scores (age, racial/ethnic identity, previous living situation, and having lived in a group home), each of the focal participants' group members' attendance during the specified cycle was summed, for those group members who reported something *different* than the focal participant. All attendance records greater than 20 were recoded as 20, as each group was only scheduled to participate in The Council for 20 hours over each 10-week period. Attendance over this maximum was assumed to be a result of participation in multiple groups, for example, as a result of attending two groups in one week or transferring between facilities. If youth indicated the "other" option for any variable and wrote in their own response, the content of these responses were compared, such that a group member who wrote down that they had most recently lived with their aunt was considered different from a focal participant who also marked the "other" response option, but indicated that they had been living with the mother of their child. Because previous living situation and having lived in a group home were to be combined to form a single living situation variable, for these 2 survey items, if group members responded differently than the focal participant, their attendance was

halved prior to being summed. These sums were then divided by the sum of all of a focal participants' group members' attendance, regardless of their demographic profiles, to create dissimilarity scores representing focal participants' dissimilarity with their fellow group members along the dimensions of age, racial/ethnic identity, and previous living situation, such that each focal participant had 1 dissimilarity score for each of these 3 demographic features. The final demographic dissimilarity scores used in the following hypothesis tests were the mean of these 3 dissimilarity scores for each focal participant. Across the 148 focal participants, demographic dissimilarity scores ranged from .17 to .91 with a mean of .59 ( $sd = .15$ ), implying that, on average, participants were the same as all other group members with regard to about 2 of the 3 demographic characteristics examined.

**Baseline behavior and belief systems.** Prior to using any of the 8 measures of behaviors and belief systems included in The Council surveys for analysis, I assessed their reliability within the current sample of 588 participants. The Cronbach's alphas, means, and standard deviations associated with each scale can be found in Table 2. Additionally, the dimensionality of 4 of these measures has not been previously assessed. A first step in my analysis was therefore determining the factor structure of the measures of self-image and social engagement, ethnic identity, self-efficacy, and safety. Each of these measures was first assessed using principal components analysis, the results of which were corroborated by the results of exploratory factor analysis.

Table 2 *Reliability Coefficients, Lengths, Means, Standard Deviations, and Ranges of Measures*

	Alpha	Number of items	Valid n	Mean	Std. Dev	Range
Self Image and Social Engagement	0.68	5	569	2.89	0.70	0-4
AMIRS	0.65	12	530	2.45	0.36	1-4
MAS	0.84	7	572	10.5	5.41	0-28
EITC	0.78	4	567	3.03	0.95	0-4
Self Efficacy- Education	0.80	3	568	3.32	0.66	1-4
Self Efficacy- Fights	0.78	2	580	3.10	0.80	1-4
DBS: Con	0.87	11	526	1.70	0.63	1-4
DBS: Pro Self	0.90	11	537	3.04	0.76	1-4
DBS: Pro Others	0.94	10	539	3.28	0.80	1-4
Safety	0.92	7	442	1.76	0.84	0-3

***Self-image and social engagement.*** Young men's positive self-image and social engagement was assessed through five items, each rated on a four-point Likert-like scale that ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree (Roa & Irvine, 2008), items B1 – B5 in the survey in Appendix C. Positive image was assessed by the item 'I am proud to be a boy/young man' and social engagement items addressed the youths' relationships with others, including having things in common with other boys, sharing their feelings with others, and having and being a good role model. Higher mean scores on this measure indicate more positive self-image and greater social engagement. I was unable to find previous research addressing this measure's validity. A principal components analysis revealed that, according to Kaiser's criterion and a Scree test, the 5 items of the self-image and social engagement scale represent one dimension. On the basis of this PCA,



exploratory factor analysis with principal axis factoring was used to extract one factor, with a cumulative extraction sums of squared loading of 30.3% ( $n = 569$ ). After this extraction, communalities for the component items range from .15 to .40.

***Masculine ideology.*** Masculine ideology was assessed using the twelve items, D1 – D12 in Appendix C, rated on a four-point Likert scale that ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree, that comprise the Adolescent Masculine Identity in Relationships Scale (AMIRS; Chu, Porche & Tolman, 2005). The AMIRS items tap the youths' endorsement of four themes regarding masculinity: physical toughness, emotional stoicism, projected self-sufficiency, and heterosexual dominance over women, together reflecting their attitudes about appropriate masculine behavior within interpersonal relationships (Chu et al., 2005). Mean score were computed for the AMIRS as well, with higher scores representing greater endorsement of conventional masculine ideology. In the initial validation of the AMIRS, reliability estimates were calculated separately for each of the age groups that participated (seventh grade: Cronbach's alpha = .71; eighth grade: Cronbach's alpha = .67; high school: Cronbach's alpha = .70) and also for the three samples combined (Cronbach's alpha = .70) (Chu et al., 2005). In the current sample, Cronbach's alpha = .65. Scores on the AMIRS have been found to positively and moderately correlate with two other measures of normative perspectives on masculinity, and to reflect a unidimensional construct (Chu et al., 2005).

***Caring and cooperation.*** In the present study, caring and cooperation was assessed through seven items of the original twenty-two items from the Modified Aggression Scale (MAS; Bosworth & Espelage, 1995), which reflect cooperation and

caring behaviors, items E1 – E7 in Appendix C. These items were selected to assess youths' engagement in pro-social behaviors, as opposed to the less desirable aggressive behaviors assessed by the other subscales. Five-point scales were used to indicate the number of times that participants engaged in given pro-social behaviors during the last thirty days: never, one or two times, three or four times, or five or more times. In a report of the subscale's initial development, it was found to have relatively poor internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha = .60$ ); Bosworth & Espelage, 1995), though in the present sample, it was found to have a reliability of Cronbach's alpha = .84.

***Ethnic identity and respect for differences.*** The Ethnic Identity – Teen Conflict Survey (EITCS; Bosworth & Espelage, 1995) was used to assess participants' ethnic pride and respect for differences. The scale, items F1 – F4 in Appendix C, consists of four items, each endorsed on a five-point Likert – like scale, with response options ranging from “never” to “always.” No prior information about the measure's dimensionality or validity is currently available, however, as assessed through Kaiser's criterion and a Scree test, the 4 items of this scale appeared to represent only one factor. According to an exploratory factor analysis using principal axis factoring, the scale had a cumulative extraction sums of squared loading of 52.8% ( $n = 567$ ) and post-extraction communalities of .24 to .80. Mean scores were computed for the EITCS, with higher scores representing greater ethnic pride and respect for differences. The scale was originally found to have internal consistency of  $\alpha = .73$  (Bosworth & Espelage, 1995), and  $\alpha = .78$  in the current sample.

*Self-efficacy.* Self-efficacy, specifically confidence regarding achieving academic and professional goals and staying out of fights, was assessed using modified versions of five items from Prothrow-Stitch's (1987, as cited in Dahlberg, Toal, Swahn & Behrens, 2005) six-item Self-Efficacy Scale. The items, G1 – G5 in Appendix C, were adapted to apply to an incarcerated population (i.e., "I will graduate from high school" was changed to "I will graduate from high school (or get my GED); "I will graduate from college" was changed to "I will go to college"). Each statement is assessed along a four-point Likert-like scale, with response options ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," with higher scores indicating greater confidence in their ability to attain their academic and professional goals and avoid conflict. Prior information about the measure's dimensionality or validity was not available, and as a result, I explored the measure's dimensionality. A principal components analysis of the 5 self-efficacy items revealed the potential presence of 2 distinguishable underlying factors. Based on the Scree test and the interpretability of the potential factor solution, 2 factors were extracted using principal axis factoring with Direct Oblimin rotation: self-efficacy regarding educational attainment and self-efficacy in terms of staying out of fights. After rotation, the 2 factors produced an extraction sums of squares loading of 59.1% ( $n = 567$ ) with communalities ranging from .45 to .70. Education-related self-efficacy accounts for 47.7% of the variance in the items assessed, while self-efficacy with regard to staying out of fights accounts for 11.3% of the variance in participants' responses on this measure. Additionally, these factors have a negative correlation of .60. In the hypothesis testing that follows, self-efficacy regarding education and self-efficacy regarding staying out of

fights were considered 2 unique subscales and analyzed independently. Mean scores for the items representing each subscale were calculated. Though the factor structure of Prothrow-Stith's (1987) original 6-item scale has not been published, the composite scale was originally determined to have a Cronbach's alpha of .70 (Prothrow-Stith, 1987, as cited in Dahlberg et al., 2005), this analysis likely was not conducted with youth in a juvenile justice setting. Additionally, the 5 items that were used to assess self-efficacy in the present study were adapted from the original measure to better apply to an incarcerated population (i.e., "I will graduate from high school" was changed to "I will graduate from high school (or get my GED)"; "I will graduate from college" was changed to "I will go to college"), potentially altering the measure's reliability and validity. In the present study, self-efficacy regarding education was found to have a Cronbach's alpha of .80, and self-efficacy in terms of staying out of fights had a Cronbach's alpha of .78.

***Attitudes about criminal behavior.*** Participants' attitudes about continuing to pursue criminal activity were assessed using the Decisional Balance Scale for Adolescent Offenders (DBS-AO; Jordan, 2005b), which is intended to measure adolescent offenders' amenability and motivation towards treatment, and their beliefs about the pros and cons of changing their criminal behavior. The scale, items H1 – H32 in Appendix C, consists of thirty-two items reflecting participants' beliefs about the consequences of abandoning criminal activity, endorsed on a four-point Likert-like scale with response options ranging from "not important" to "very important." The DBS-AO includes measures of three components of attitudes: cons associated with abandoning criminal behavior ( $\alpha = .91$ ), pros for one's self that would result from giving up crime ( $\alpha = .89$ ), and benefits that

participants believe others in their lives would experience if they ceased criminal activity ( $\alpha = .90$ ) (Jordan, 2005b). In the current study, each of the subscales were found to have internal consistency of  $\alpha = .87$ ,  $\alpha = .90$ , and  $\alpha = .94$ , respectively. In prior efforts to validate the scale, responses to the three subscales of the DBS-AO did not correlate as hypothesized with other measures of stages of change, outcomes of a resocialization program, or the Callousness/Unemotional subscale of a measure of antisocial and deceptive behavior among adolescents. However, each of the three subscales was found to measure unique constructs pertinent to abandoning criminal behavior (Jordan, 2005b).

**Behavior and belief system dissimilarity.** To compute behavior and belief system dissimilarity scores for each focal participant, each of their group members' scale scores on each of the outcome measures were multiplied by their attendance for that cycle of The Council. Each of these products was then divided by the sum of all of a focal participant's group members' attendance; these scores represent how much each group member contributed to their groups' baseline behaviors and belief systems. These scores were then summed for each focal participant, to create group mean scale scores, weighted by their group members' attendance. For each focal participant, the weighted standard deviations of their group members' scale scores were computed, for each measure of behaviors and belief systems. The difference between each focal participant's scale score and the weighted mean of their group members' scale scores on each measure were computed, and divided by the weighted standard deviations of their group members' scale scores on each measure. Calculating weighted standard deviations required that each focal participant have at least 2 group members; 7 focal participants had only 1

other group member, and were therefore not assigned a dissimilarity score, reducing the number of focal participants used in hypothesis testing requiring behavior and belief system dissimilarity scores to 141. After removing one outlier (see Assessing Assumptions), the mean behavior and belief system dissimilarity score was 33.12 ( $sd = 71.72$ ).

**Safety.** Seven four-point Likert-like items and four open-ended questions were used to evaluate participants' satisfaction with The Council and how safe they felt while participating in program activities. On a scale of "never" to "always," the young men were asked to indicate how often they felt that they could say what they were thinking and trust their group leaders, were treated fairly and respected by leaders and fellow participants, that the group leaders focused on their strengths, that the program was worth their time, and that the contents of the group conversations was kept confidential. This scale consists of items S1 – S7 in Appendix C, and was written by the creators of The Council and included in the surveys on the basis of their face validity.

Using Kaiser's criterion and the Scree plot that resulted from a principal components analysis, I extracted one factor from the 7 items of the safety measure, using principal axis factoring. This factor resulted in a cumulative extraction sums of squares loading of 61.2% ( $n = 442$ ), with post-extraction communalities of .54 to .73. Only 442 cases were used to assess the reliability of the safety measure because this scale was only included on surveys that were completed after youth had participated in The Council. As a result, surveys completed at the very first measurement point were not included in this analysis. I found this measure to have a reliability coefficient of .92 and a mean of 1.76

( $sd = .84$ ) on a scale of 0 to 3, whereby higher scores represented greater experiences of safety.

The measure of safety that was used in each of the analyses described below came from the latter survey completed by each participant, such that safety scores corresponded to youths' feelings of safety in the group that they had participated in during the ten weeks immediately prior.

**Scale Scores and Change Scores.** As all of the scales had reasonable values of Cronbach's alpha, scale scores were computed for each of the 10 subscales identified above. All negatively phrased items were reverse-coded, and system-missing data were coded accordingly. For all of the subscales, with the exception of the caring and cooperation subscale of the MAS, scale scores were created by taking an average of each participant's responses to the items or reverse-scored items that comprised each scale. Scale scores for the caring and cooperation subscale of the MAS were created by summing participants' responses on the component items. On both the measure of youths' masculine ideology and the outcomes of ceasing criminal behavior that they perceive as negative, lower scores represent more desirable outcomes. With regard to the 8 other measures, however, higher scale scores represent more desirable outcomes. In creating participants' pre-to-post Council change scores, their latter scores on the AMIRS and DBS-Con measures were subtracted from their earlier scores, while change scores on each of the other measures were computed by subtracting participants' initial scores from

their scale scores on those measures at a later measurement point, such that all change scores represent positive, or desired, change.

**Control Variables.** In the regression analyses that follow, I controlled for participants' number of group members, attendance, felony level, and tenure in ODYS. Descriptive statistics for each of these variables can be found in table 1 above (p. 68). The number of other young men who attended each participant's Council group-- the number of others against whom each participant was compared to determine their dissimilarity -- was determined based on the number of surveys that were collected from youth in each group. These values were included as control variables to contextualize youths' dissimilarity scores: the experience of being very different from one's group members is likely quite different if the group consists of two other young men as opposed to fourteen others.

Participants' attendance, criminal backgrounds, and the duration of their time in the system were obtained from official ODYS administrative records. These records reflect the number of hours of The Council in which each youth participated during each ten-week cycle of the program, the felony level of the crime for which each participant is being held in juvenile corrections, and the number of days that the youth has lived in an ODYS facility. The specific crimes include robbery, aggravated robbery, assault, burglary, manslaughter, kidnapping, receiving stolen property, rape, attempted rape, sexual battery, gross sexual imposition, breaking and entering, improperly handling firearms, murder, theft, and felonious assault, and the felony levels, ranging from 1 to 5, represent the severity of the crime, with murder as its own category.



Due to the nature of juvenile corrections, the youth who participated in this study did not have a choice about their participation in The Council on a session by session basis: any failure to attend the program is likely due to events internal to their residential facility, as opposed to their ability to access the program. Therefore, The Council's accessibility should not be considered in assessing the program in this context, as would be the case if participants were considered in this study according to the program's intention to treat them, as opposed to the amount of the program in which they actually participated. Because positive change at the outcome is expected to result from continued group participation, youth's attendance should directly correspond to the amount of positive change that they report on measures of their behaviors and belief systems.

Felony level was also controlled in regression analyses. The type and severity of offense that those in correctional settings have committed is often a determinant of their social standing, with those having committed sexually-based offenses and the lowest-level crimes at the bottom of the social hierarchy, and therefore most vulnerable to victimization by others in the facility (Winfree, Newbold & Tubb, 2002). Therefore, the severity of the crime for which youths are incarcerated should correspond to the level of safety that they feel within their facilities in general, which may transfer to their experiences in The Council. Additionally, in the context of Relational Cultural Theory, similarity is hypothesized to generate positive change in some individuals because of its implications for the ability to engage in mutual empathy. According to a meta-analysis by Jolliffe and Farrington (2004), violent criminal behavior is related to limited

empathetic ability, as opposed to non-violent crime and sexual offenses, where the relationship to empathy is less clear. Youth who are convicted of violent crimes may start with a different degree of empathic ability, such that similarity to their group members may differentially effect on their ability to empathize, when compared to those convicted of crimes that are more ambiguously associated with empathetic ability.

The longer that youth are confined in environments of exclusively same-sex peers, the more sex-typed their relational styles may become (Rose & Rudolph, 2006), and institutionalized discouragement of emotional connections, close bonds, and emotional expression (Abrams et al., 2008; Anderson-Nathe & Aguilar, 2008; Covington, 2007) may influence youth more strongly the longer that they remain in those institutions. The more time that youth spend in ODYS, then, the more they may be expected to adopt the norms and values of the institution, which, in the case of traditionally male relational styles, emotional connection, close bonds, and emotional expression, stand in direct contrast to the aims of The Council. As a result, the number of days that youth have spent in the correctional facility was controlled.

## Results

### Hypothesis Tests

**Assessing assumptions.** Prior to beginning hypothesis testing, the data were examined to determine their normality, identify outliers, assess the multicollinearity of the predictor variables, and calculate the intraclass correlation for each outcome variable. Histograms of focal participants' change scores on each of the 9 outcome measures and scale scores on the measure of safety were examined. None of the distributions appeared skewed or non-normal enough to warrant transformation, though change scores on the measure of education-related self efficacy appeared slightly negatively skewed, and change scores corresponding to fighting- related self-efficacy, the negative aspects of ceasing criminal behavior, and the benefits to others of ceasing criminal behavior appeared quite closely clustered around 0. Mahalanobis' Distance, Cook's Distance, leverage statistics, and standardized residuals were also calculated for each focal participant's 9 change scores and safety scores to identify outliers. Boxplots of each of these statistics revealed a small handful of outliers on each of the dependent variables, however, considering the relative normality of the histograms, as well as p-plots and scatterplots, and the apparent absence of data entry mistakes, no transformations were conducted and no cases were removed from the analysis.

A histogram of demographic dissimilarity scores also revealed that this predictor variable was relatively normally distributed. The distribution of behavior and belief system dissimilarity scores, however, appeared to contain one pronounced outlier with a score of well over 100,000,000,000, compared to a distribution which otherwise had a

mean of 33.12 ( $sd = 71.72$ ) and a range of 4.93 to 767.78. Though this case appeared to be legitimate (i.e., not a result of a data entry error), it was not included in analyses that involved scores of behavior and belief system dissimilarity.

Due to the inherent nested structure of the data, with youths' potential changes presumed to result from their participation in groups of their peers, intraclass correlations were calculated to determine the magnitude of the non-independence of each outcome variable, as per table 3 below. While the youth only spend approximately two hours per week in their Council groups, potentially leaving the other one hundred and sixty-six hours every week for them to give and receive influence from other young men, it is still necessary to account for the inherent nesting of youth in their groups: left to their own devices, it is unlikely that the young men in ODYS initiate the type of conversations that The Council intends to induce, or explicitly discuss the content areas that The Council addresses. Additionally, while the characteristics of the youth who comprise each group are accounted for within each participant's dissimilarity score, there are other group-specific factors that dissimilarity scores do not tap into, such as aspects of group facilitation, location, and schedule. The small intra-class correlations imply that the youths' outcomes varied much more within their groups than between their groups; the features that made each group unique did not have very much of an influence on youths' outcomes, relative to their individual differences. Additionally, 10 one-way analyses of variance were used to compare standardized residual values across groups on each of the 10 outcome measures. The absence of any significant between-group differences on any of the outcome measures implies homogeneity of errors across the groups.

Table 3. *Between-group Variance, Within-Group Variance, and Intraclass Correlations of Outcome Measures*

	Between-group Variance	Within-group Variance	Intraclass Correlation
Self-Image and Social Engagement	0.04	0.39	0.09
AMIRS	0.00	0.11	0.00
MAS	0.00	24.28	0.00
EITC	0.03	0.69	0.04
Self-Efficacy-Education	0.00	0.55	0.00
Self-Efficacy-Fights	0.00	0.76	0.00
DBS: Con	0.00	0.42	0.00
DBS: Pro Self	0.02	0.45	0.04
DBS: Pro Others	0.00	0.55	0.00
Safety	0.00	0.64	0.00

**Research question one.** The first research question posed in this thesis was whether Council participants reported changes in their behaviors and belief systems over the course of their participation in the program. A series of 9 matched-pairs t-tests were used to compare focal participants' reports of their self-image and social engagement, masculine ideology, caring and cooperation, ethnic pride and respect for differences, education-related self-efficacy, non-violence-related self-efficacy, perceived negative consequences of abandoning criminal behavior, and perceived benefits of abandoning criminal behavior for both themselves and others in their lives, at the two survey completions that bounded their focal window of participation.

Results indicated that youth reported significantly more self-efficacy regarding their educational attainment at the earlier of the measurement points ( $M = 3.37, sd = .56$ ), than at the measurement points following their participation in The Council ( $M = 3.21, sd = .71$ ),  $t(146) = 2.66, p < .01$ , though the size of this effect is considered small by Cohen's guidelines (1977, as cited in Howell, 2007). Similarly, youth reported valuing their perceived personal benefits of abandoning criminal behavior significantly more at the earlier of the two focal measurement points ( $M = 3.12, sd = .623$ ) than at the latter ( $M = 2.99, sd = .70$ ),  $t(146) = 2.23, p < .05$ , though this effect size is smaller than would be considered "small" by Cohen's standards (1977, as cited in Howell, 2007). There were also significant differences found between youths' reports of the value that they placed on the benefits that they expect others in their lives to incur as a result of their cessation of criminal behavior at the earlier and latter measurement points. Again, youths' scores were higher, and therefore more desirable, at the earlier of the survey administrations ( $M = 3.44, sd = .69$ ) than at the latter ( $M = 3.27, sd = .73$ ),  $t(146) = 2.78, p < .05$ , with an effect size that would be considered small. Thus, none of the 9 proposed hypotheses within the first research question were confirmed; though 3 significant pre-post Council changes were identified, they were not in the hypothesized direction. In the case of all 3 significant results, the changes in youths' responses displayed a pattern opposite of that intended by The Council, as indicated in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Means, Pre-post Standard Scores, and Effect Sizes on Measures

	<i>M</i> at initial measurement point	<i>M</i> at latter measurement point	Valid <i>n</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>D</i>
Self-Image and Social Engagement	3.06 ( <i>sd</i> = 0.51)	3.07 ( <i>sd</i> = 0.60)	148	147	-0.28	0.78	-0.02
AMIRS	2.47 ( <i>sd</i> = 0.39)	2.49 ( <i>sd</i> = 0.30)	148	147	-0.62	0.54	-0.05
MAS	10.81 ( <i>sd</i> = 4.39)	11.5 ( <i>sd</i> = 4.93)	140	139	-1.65	0.10	-0.14
EITC	3.24 ( <i>sd</i> = 0.74)	3.19 ( <i>sd</i> = .085)	140	139	0.83	0.41	0.07
Self- Efficacy- Education	3.37 ( <i>sd</i> = 0.56)	3.21 ( <i>sd</i> = 0.71)	147	146	2.66	0.01*	0.22
Self- Efficacy- Fights	3.07 ( <i>sd</i> = 0.74)	2.99 ( <i>sd</i> = 0.79)	146	145	1.14	0.26	0.09
DBS: Con	1.63 ( <i>sd</i> = 0.59)	1.68 ( <i>sd</i> = 0.62)	147	146	-0.83	0.41	0.07
DBS: Pro Self	3.12 ( <i>sd</i> = 0.66)	2.99 ( <i>sd</i> = 0.70)	147	146	2.23	0.03*	0.18
DBS: Pro Others	3.44 ( <i>sd</i> = 0.69)	3.27 ( <i>sd</i> = 0.73)	147	146	2.78	0.01*	0.23

Note: \* $p < .05$

**Research question two.** The second research question was addressed using Barron and Kenny's (1986, as cited in Howell, 2007) method of assessing mediation, to determine whether participants' experiences of safety in their Council groups mediated the relationship between their dissimilarity from their group members, with regard to their demographics and behaviors and belief systems, and their degree of change on each of the 9 outcome measures.

The first step in the mediation analysis was determining whether participants' demographic and behavior and belief system dissimilarity scores were predictive of changes in their self-image and social engagement, masculine ideology, caring and cooperation, ethnic pride and respect for differences, education-related self-efficacy, non-violence-related self-efficacy, importance of perceived negative consequences of abandoning criminal behavior, and importance of perceived benefits of abandoning criminal behavior for both themselves and others in their lives. Using the 141 focal participants for whom all similarity scores were computed, who were nested within 50 groups<sup>1</sup>, 1 multilevel model was tested to assess dissimilarity as predictors of change scores on each of the outcome variables. In each of the 9 models, the number of days that participants had spent in ODYS on September 14, 2010, the number of hours of The Council in which youth had participated between the completion of their 2 focal surveys,

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<sup>1</sup> Of the 50 groups used to test the initial set of models, 11 consisted of only a single focal participant, which is markedly smaller than the 30 participants per group minimum that Kreft (1996, as cited in Hox, 2010) recommends for conducting hierarchical analyses. Each of the 9 models described above were also tested using the smaller sample of 130 focal participants who were clustered in groups of at least 2 members. Youths' days in DYS, Boys Council attendance, felony level, and the number of group members who were considered in computing their similarity scores were used as control variables, and the predictive ability of their demographic and behavior and belief system dissimilarity scores were assessed. The same pattern of significant results was identified as in the tests that utilized the entire sample, with one exception: demographic dissimilarity scores did not predict changes in education-related self-efficacy at the  $p = .05$  level, though its influence does appear marginally significant ( $\beta = 1.35, SE = .76, p < .08$ ).



youths' felony level, and the number of other youth who were considered in creating each focal participant's dissimilarity scores were included as control variables.

Controlling for youths' days in ODYS, Council attendance, felony level, and the size of their groups, participants' demographic dissimilarity from the other members of their group was positively and significantly related to their change in education-related self-efficacy ( $\beta = 1.43$ ,  $SE = .71$ ,  $p < .05$ ). When all of the other variables in the model were considered equal to 0, which was below the actual observed minimum values of several measures included in the model, participants' self-efficacy regarding their educational attainment decreased by an average of 1.73 ( $SE = 0.70$ ) between their survey completions, on a scale of 1 – 4 with higher scores representing greater self-efficacy. However, as participants became more different from the other members of their groups in terms of their demographic profiles, the less their education-related self-efficacy decreased. A post-hoc analysis of variance was conducted to determine whether any of the demographic features that had been included in the creation of the demographic dissimilarity scores were related to differences in participants' initial self-efficacy regarding their education. Had significant pre- Council differences been found, it might have been possible to claim that a demographically distinct subset of the youth were responsible for influencing their group members' self-efficacy, however, no such effects were found.

After the specified control variables were entered into the models predicting youths' changes on the measure of their values surrounding the negative consequences of abandoning their criminal behavior, both youths' demographic and behavior and belief

system dissimilarity from their group members were significant. Controlling for all of the variables in the model, the average change in youths' perceptions of the importance of negative consequences of abandoning their criminal behavior was  $-0.12$  ( $SE = 0.57$ ) on a scale of 1 – 4, hence changing in the opposite direction that The Council intends.

However, youths' dissimilarity from their group members with regard to their demographic profiles was related to an increase on this scale ( $\beta = 1.28$ ,  $SE = 0.58$ ,  $p < .05$ ): the more dissimilar youth were to their group members, the more desirable their change in the recognition of the negative consequences of criminal activity, as per table 2. Conversely, youths' dissimilarity from their group members in terms of their behaviors and belief systems was negatively related to their change on this scale ( $\beta = -0.01$ ,  $SE = 0.00$ ,  $p < .01$ ), such that the more a participant differed from their group members in their behaviors and beliefs, the more importance they placed on their perceptions of the negative consequences of abandoning crime between the two measurement points, and hence, the less desirable their change on this measure, as depicted in Table 5. An additional post-hoc ANOVA was conducted to identify differences between demographically-defined clusters of youth in the value that they initially placed on the negative consequences of their criminal behavior at the earlier of their focal measurement points. Here as well, however, no significant differences were found.

Controlling for all of the other variables in the model, youths' behavior and belief-system dissimilarity was positively and significantly predictive of their changes in the positive results that they expected themselves to experience as a result of their

cessation of criminal activities. Youth reported an average decline of 0.51 points ( $SE = 0.57$ ) on the 1 – 4 scale of the importance that they place on their perceptions of personal gains that would result from abandoning criminal behavior. However, for every point increase in youths' behavior and belief system dissimilarity from their group members, their change score on this variable was found to increase by an average of 0.01 points ( $SE = 0.00, p < .05$ ): greater dissimilarity from group members with regard to behaviors and belief systems was related to less of an undesirable change in youths' perceptions of how abandoning their criminal behavior would benefit them.

Similarly, youths' behavior and belief system dissimilarity from their group members was significantly predictive of their change on the measure of the importance that they place on the benefits they expect others to incur as a result of their disengagement from criminal behavior. When all predictors in the model were considered equal to 0, participants reported an average decline of -0.37 points ( $SE = 0.69$ ) on this measure of their decision to cease their criminal activity, representing an overall trend that is counter to The Council's intentions. However, the measure of youths' dissimilarity from their group members in terms of their behaviors and belief systems was positively related to their change on this scale ( $\beta = 0.01, SE = 0.00, p < .05$ ). The more participants differed from their fellow group members in their behaviors and belief systems, the more their decline in valuing the benefits that they perceived others would incur if they stopped their criminal behaviors was attenuated.

As a result of the significance of youths' demographic dissimilarity in predicting their change in education related self-efficacy and the negative consequences of

abandoning their criminal activity, and their behavior and belief system dissimilarity in predicting how they weighed the cons and self- and other- relevant pros of ceasing criminal behavior, the second step of the mediation analysis was attempted. A multilevel model was tested, predicting youths' scores on the measure of safety from the specified control variables, as well as their demographic and behavior and belief system dissimilarity from their fellow group members. When all of the predictor variables were held at 0, participants' mean safety score was 2.46 ( $SE = 0.68$ ) on a scale of 0 – 3, with higher scores representing greater feelings of safety. However, neither type of dissimilarity score significantly predicted focal participants' safety scores. Hence, investigation of the mediation model stopped here.

Table 5. *Demographic and Behavior and Belief System Dissimilarity Coefficients in Hierarchical Models Predicting Outcome Measures*

	<i>Mean</i> <sup>†</sup>	<i>Standard Error of Mean</i>	<i>Demographic Dissimilarity</i>			<i>Behavior and Belief System Dissimilarity</i>		
			$\beta^{\dagger}$	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>p value</i>	$\beta^{\dagger}$	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>p value</i>
Self-Image and Social Engagement Change	0.11	0.63	0.68	0.63	0.29	0.00	0.00	0.31
AMIRS Change	-0.08	0.31	-0.10	0.32	0.75	0.00	0.00	0.37
MAS Change	6.65	3.95	-1.63	3.89	0.677	0.02	0.02	0.27
EITC Change	0.16	0.87	0.89	0.87	0.31	0.00	0.00	0.26
Self-Efficacy-Education Change	-1.73	0.70	1.43	0.71	0.05 *	0.00	0.00	0.30
Self-Efficacy-Fights Change	0.06	0.73	-0.40	0.75	0.60	$-5.91e^{-5}$	0.00	0.99
DBS: Con Change	-0.12	0.57	1.28	0.58	0.03*	-0.01	0.00	0.001*
DBS: Pro Self Change	-0.51	0.57	-0.89	0.58	0.13	0.01	0.00	0.012*
DBS: Pro Others Change	-0.37	0.69	-1.22	0.71	0.09	0.01	0.00	0.04*
Safety	2.46	0.68	0.40	0.70	0.57	0.00	0.00	0.611

*Notes.*

<sup>†</sup>Controlling for days in DYS, Council attendance, felony level, and group size

\*  $p < .05$

**Research question three.** The proposed third research question involved comparing the strength or relative importance of demographic and behavior and belief system dissimilarity scores in predicting youths' scores on the measure of safety. However, considering that neither demographic dissimilarity, nor behavior and belief

system dissimilarity were significant predictors of safety, their relative non-significant strengths were not compared.

## **Discussion**

### **Changes in Behaviors and Belief Systems**

The first research question and its component hypotheses, that youth would report changes in their behaviors and belief systems in keeping with the mission of The Council, were included in this study to determine whether the program exerted its intended influence on its participants. The results of this thesis demonstrate that this is not the case: the only measures of behavior and belief systems that differed significantly between focal participants' survey completions were their education-related self-efficacy and their valuing of the personal benefits and the benefits that others in their lives would incur as a result of ceasing their criminal activity, all of which changed in the direction opposite those of The Council's intentions. The lack of change that participants reported with regard to their self-image and social engagement, masculine ideology, caring and cooperation, ethnic pride and respect for differences, non-violence-related self-efficacy, and perceived negative consequences of abandoning criminal behavior, and their undesired changes on the remaining three measures, may be a result of the amount of The Council that the youth received, relative to the amount of time that they spent in ODYS.

The focal participants included in this thesis had attended an average of just over fifteen hours of The Council, compared to the 1665 hours that they spent engaged in other activities within ODYS during the ten-week window between their survey completions. While The Council may generate highly salient, thought-inducing experiential activities and conversation, the reality of the program's length, in terms of

both the number and duration of group meetings, may prevent its effects from becoming apparent in the context of other aspects of the young men's experiences during their incarceration. It may not be realistic to expect twenty hours of group activities and discussion to reverse the effects of incarcerated males' greater than average endorsement of traditional masculine ideology (Blazina et al., 2005; Lloyd, Williams & Sullivan, 2004; O'Neil, 1986), participation in violent power hierarchies (Cesaroni & Alvi, 2010), histories of family trauma (Hughes, 1998), anti-social and anti-authority values (Eisenman, 1993), prior experiences of physical and/or sexual victimization (Brezina, 1998; Eisenman, 1993; Heck & Walsh, 2000; Kaufman & Widon, 1999), and patterns of depression and suicide ideation and attempts (Martin, Sigda, & Kupersmidt, 1998; Abrantes et al., 2005).

However, it is possible that participation in The Council curbed even greater negative changes in youths' behaviors and belief systems, which may result from their experiences of incarceration. While the number of days that youth had spent in ODYS prior to beginning the program was not significantly predictive of their change on any of the outcome measures, previous research has documented the tendency of juvenile correctional facilities to reinforce anti-social behaviors and belief systems via deviancy training (Dishion, McCord & Poulin, 1999; Poulin, Dishion, & Haas, 1999), latent discouragement of forming emotional connections, (Covington, 2007; Abrams et al., 2008) and the perpetual and environmentally engrained reminders of one's status as a delinquent. Council participants may display more of the program's intended changes if they enter their groups with fewer pre-existing barriers towards meeting the program's



goals, and/or not living in a total institutional environment that inherently reinforces many of the behaviors and beliefs that The Council attempts to counter.

### **Similarity and Change**

Despite the overall trend of negative changes that the youth reported, pursuing the second research question, whether safety mediates the relationship between similarity and change, revealed that group composition did have some effect on this trend. The undesirable changes on all three of the measures on which participants' responses differed at the two measurement points were significantly attenuated by youths' dissimilarity from their group members, either with regard to their demographic profiles or behaviors and belief systems.

As young men's demographic profiles became more different from those of the other youth in their discussion groups the less their education-related self-efficacy declined. Though a post-hoc ANOVA did not reveal any initial significant differences in education-related self-efficacy based on demographic features, it is possible that merely hearing others from a range of backgrounds discuss their educational aspirations led the young men to reflect on their own potential for attaining education. Particularly if Council participants perceived the others in their groups as being in any way less advantaged or mature than themselves, as a function of their age, race, or family structure and prior living situations, yet heard them expressing determination and confidence in their ability to attain and utilize an education, they may have reconsidered their own ability to do so as well. If this was the case, the demographic features of other participants that prompted young men to reconsider their own abilities to attain an

education would be individually determined, based on their own perceptions of demographic characteristics that make others more or less advantaged than themselves.

The more that participants differed from their peers with regard to their behaviors and belief systems, the less negative were the changes in their perceptions of the importance of abandoning crime for their own benefit and that of others in their lives. One potential explanation of this findings is that listening to others' diverse perspectives on their reasons for engaging in criminal activity, as well as their reasons for ceasing to do so, as would result from their differences in behaviors and belief systems, may have prompted the focal participants to reconsider their own motivations for participating in and abstaining from illegal behavior. Hearing others articulate their priorities and motivations may have led the young men to recognize additional potential benefits to themselves and others in their lives, which would result from their abandoning criminal activity. Greater differences in behaviors and belief systems among Council participants may have enabled diverse groups to collectively generate more ideas about reasons that one might decide to leave their criminality behind them. In turn, these differences in behaviors and belief systems could have led groups to more exhaustive brainstorming about reasons to cease criminal activity. This result may also be interpreted as greater similarity between a participant and their group members leading to greater negative change in perceptions of the importance of abandoning crime; greater baseline dissimilarity in behavior and belief systems may have prevented groups from falling into patterns of reinforcing pre-existent similar beliefs about criminal activity.

In testing the first set of hypotheses to determine whether Council participants' reports of their behaviors and belief systems differed at the two measurement points, it did not appear that the participants changed significantly with regard to the value that they placed on the negative outcomes that they believed they would incur as a result of abandoning their criminal behavior. However, in pursuing the second research question, to determine whether safety mediated the relationship between youths' dissimilarity from their group members and changes on each of the measured outcomes, changes in participants' reports of the importance of the negative consequences of abandoning their criminality were significantly predicted by both their demographic and behavior and belief system dissimilarity from their fellow group members. Greater differences between focal participants and their fellow group members in terms of their demographic profiles were significantly related to changes in the desired direction on this measure. Greater differences between focal participants and their fellow group members in terms of their behaviors and belief systems, on the other hand, were significantly related to changes in the opposite direction. This dynamic is presumably responsible for the lack of the overall difference between participants' valuing of the negative consequences of abandoning their criminal behavior.

### **Similarity and Emotional Safety**

I initially posited that support for Relational Cultural Theory would be found if a positive relationship between safety and change was identified. If this was the case, safety could be interpreted as a precursor to self-disclosure, which may have enabled change through participation in connection. Conversely, I expected that evidence of Self-

Attention Theory would be found if safety only partially mediated the relationship between dissimilarity and change, as the primary mechanism of change in the context of Self-Attention Theory is difference from others. I expected that, if Self-Attention Theory was operating in The Council, dissimilarity would remain a significant predictor of change, even after accounting for youths' experiences of safety. However, neither demographic nor behavior and belief system dissimilarity were significantly related to youths' reports of safety. Therefore, safety did not mediate or partially mediate the relationship between participants' similarity to each other and their changes in behaviors and belief systems. This research question was included in part to help identify the relative contribution of each type of similarity to participants' feelings of emotional safety for the practical purpose of clarifying which personal characteristics are most salient for these youth and should be most carefully considered in assigning them to groups of their peers. However, the non-significance of either type of similarity in predicting safety scores prohibits me from making such recommendations.

### **Emotional Safety and Change**

Due to the non-significance of both types of dissimilarity in predicting youths' experiences of safety, I did not attempt the final step of the mediation analysis, predicting change in behaviors and belief systems from both types of dissimilarity scores as well as reports of safety. Hence, I cannot claim that safety did or did not significantly predict changes in participants' endorsements of behaviors and belief systems, or that dissimilarity predicted change over and above safety scores. I can only confidently assert that, in general, dissimilarity was significantly related to participants' relative stagnation

in their education-related self-efficacy and valuing of the consequences of abandoning criminality. The role of emotional safety in enabling individual change within groups, whether in the intended direction or not, remains an important question for future research.

### **Assessing Theories of Change**

Determining whether the data collected in this study are consistent with Relational-Cultural Theory or Self-Attention Theory is complicated by the relative direction and magnitude of the changes that participants reported. Across the behaviors and belief systems that youth endorsed at each measurement point, and independent of participants' dissimilarity from their group members, the general trend was change in the direction opposite The Council's intentions. The magnitude of these changes in behaviors and belief systems were attenuated by youths' dissimilarity from their group members, such that those who were more different tended to report less negative change (with the exception of behavior and belief system dissimilarity significantly predicting greater perceived importance of the negative consequences of abandoning criminal activities). Hence, greater attenuation of negative change, or a greater tendency for behaviors and belief systems to remain constant, is considered a relatively desirable finding.

Looking only at the regression coefficients associated with dissimilarity scores, it appears that the more different youth are from their fellow group members the more positive change they reported. This finding lends some support for the operation of Self-Attention Theory within Council groups. Dissimilarity may have generated desirable

changes in behaviors and belief systems through exposure to new perspectives on the effects of criminal behavior, encouraging reflection on how youth differ from their peers, and potentially creating discomfort due to these differences. Engaging in these activities and thought processes could have resulted in conformity to behaviors and belief systems that are more common within the group.

In the context of the overall trend of negative changes in behaviors and belief systems, another possible interpretation of the data is that participants' increasing differences from their fellow group members significantly attenuated this change. The more focal participants differed from their fellow group members, the less they changed. From this perspective, Relational-Cultural Theory could potentially offer a more compelling explanation of the dynamic that occurred within Council groups. The dissimilarity between focal participants and their group members may be interpreted as barriers to establishing safety, which, in the context of Relational Cultural Theory, may be held responsible for different youths' lack of change in their behaviors and belief systems, regardless of the direction of the change that may have occurred. A significant relationship between either demographic or behavior and belief system dissimilarity and participants' reports of safety would have provided additional support for this theory.

Interpreted differently, the more similar youth were to others in their group, the greater their negative change. Interpreting the data from this perspective also provides support for Relational Cultural Theory: the more young men had in common with others in their group, the more their behavior and belief systems evolved, theoretically as a result of engaging in connection and feeling heard and understood by their peers (Miller,

1975). The confusion comes in interpreting the direction of the changes that the youth reported, relative to those that The Council intends to generate. I initially expected that the process of change proposed by Relational Cultural Theory would apply to generating change in a new direction, in this case as The Council intends to facilitate, as opposed to reinforcing a pre-existing pattern of change, such as that found in the data.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

#### **Changes in Behaviors and Belief Systems**

One aspect of the present study that makes its implications particularly unclear is the overall negative trend in participants' reports of their behaviors and belief systems. Pursuing the same research questions using a sample of youth in a context where their pro-social behaviors and beliefs may not be prone to decline as a function of their environment might provide a more pure approximation of The Council's impact. Alternatively, examining changes in a comparable control group of incarcerated youth may help identify whether The Council moderated the declines in pro-social behaviors and beliefs that were identified in this study. However, it would be difficult to discern the impact of the overall experience of being in a juvenile correctional facility from that of other programming that youth receive therein. Any control group that would be examined would be participating in some alternative programming.

#### **Emotional Safety**

As in the cases of the non-significant changes in youths' reports of their behaviors and belief systems at the two survey measurement points, the absence of significant

relationships between both types of dissimilarity and safety may be due to the amount of time that youth spent in The Council, relative to other activities in ODYS. Though the questions that were used to assess participants' emotional safety asked specifically about their time in the program, as opposed to their experiences of safety more broadly, it is possible that the participants' perceptions of emotional safety within the larger institutions influenced their reports of safety within their groups. Youths' beliefs about the trustworthiness of ODYS staff and their freedom from their peers' ridicule generally may have impacted the way that they thought about these individuals and their interactions in reporting on the safety that they experienced within The Council. If this is the case, youths' feelings of emotional safety within ODYS or their institutions of residence may have been influential in shaping their reports of emotional safety within The Council, above and beyond the composition of their Council groups.

Additionally, participants' reports of their feelings of safety within their Council groups may have resulted from their individual relationships with the other youth and their group facilitators, which may have been formed outside of The Council on the basis of factors other than their similarities. For instance, some youth may have ended up in Council groups with young men that they knew from other contexts within their residential institution, or facilitated by ODYS staff-people that they already knew in different capacities. These relationships could then influence their perceptions of safety within The Council, potentially over and above their similarities to peers in their groups. At this point, I have not been able to definitively ascertain how youth were grouped for The Council or the nature of youths' relationships with the group facilitators outside of



the program, to determine the potential influence of youths' relationships outside of The Council on their perceptions of the interpersonal dynamics within the program.

Furthermore, as The Council was introduced in ODYS, the facilities in which it was implemented were simultaneously adopting a more strengths-based orientation towards all aspects of their daily functioning (Stickrath, 2010), and participants' indications of safety may therefore reflect these shifts as opposed to the content of their Council groups.

In an experimental study of the roles of similarity and safety in The Council's functioning, participants and group facilitators would have had no prior interactions and groups would be conducted in a relatively neutral setting. Under such circumstances, youths' reports of their emotional safety within the program would more clearly reflect the safety that they experienced within the group, as opposed to residual feelings of safety from prior interactions with their group members, facilitators, and institutions. Such an experiment may not perfectly correspond to real-world implementations of The Council, but may enable better discernment of which theory of change best characterizes the processes that occur within the program.

Another potential set of explanations of the non-significant relationships between youths' dissimilarity and their experiences of safety could be the influence of group-level factors, such as characteristics of group facilitators, meeting days and times, or the physical environments in which each group gathered. However, the intra-class correlation associated with participants' reports of their emotional safety within The Council was 0. This ratio of group variation in experiences of safety to individual

variation in feelings of safety indicates that these group-level variables were no more salient than individual differences in shaping youths' reports of emotional safety.

Another limitation of the present study's analysis of emotional safety is its imperfect measurement of the construct. In keeping with the evaluative nature of the broader project that gave rise to this thesis, the measure of emotional safety that was used reflects The Council creators' understanding of the construct, as they felt that it pertains to participants' experiences, as opposed to being guided by a single theoretical framework. The previously identified components of emotional safety include freedom from shaming and blaming, willingness to approach others for help, maintenance of positive and respectful regard for fellow group members, sense of community, and group cohesion. However, the scale that was used to assess emotional safety did not address each of these discrete components of the construct, and does not thoroughly assess safety as it was conceptualized within the present study. Additionally, participants' experiences of safety were measured at the same time as their outcome behaviors and belief systems. Though mediators are assumed to occur between measurement of the independent and outcome variables, the hypothesized mediator and the outcome variable were assessed simultaneously in this study. Additionally, it may be particularly difficult to determine the success of any intervention or prevention programs for adolescent males, as a result of characteristics of the target population: the masculine norm of independence tends to lead adolescent males to deny their dependence upon and appreciation of programs that they may genuinely value, preventing them from reporting all of their positive

experiences and changes congruous with intervention and prevention programs (Pollack, 2006).

### **Similarity**

More closely tracking participants' attendance to determine the amount of time that they actually spent in each other's presence may also provide a clearer picture of how their similarity to those that they engage with may influence their experiences in the program. Each focal participant's dissimilarity scores captured nuanced information about their Council group. Focal participants were not included in the calculations of their groups' weighted means and standard deviations reflecting each measured behavior and belief system, and each of their group members' scores were weighted by the number of hours they had spent in the group. As a result, these statistics represent the general attitudes of each participant's group in the absence of their own influence and participation. I did not have the necessary information to determine which sessions each young man in the study had attended. As a result, though each focal participant's scores were weighted by their attendance, and their group members' scores were weighted by the number of sessions *they* attended in calculating each focal participant's dissimilarity scores, the number of sessions that each focal participant actually attended with each of the other youth in their Council group is unknown. A group member who spent sixteen hours in their Council group would have been weighed relatively heavily in creating the similarity score for a participant who may have only attended four hours of The Council, which theoretically, could have been the only four hours that this particular group member was not in attendance. Hence, focal participants' dissimilarity scores do not

perfectly reflect the interpersonal dynamics of the groups that they actually experienced. Future research aimed at determining the influence of group members' similarity would benefit from the ability to incorporate group members' actual exposure to one another into the creation of variables that represent dissimilarity.

Participants' potential intellectual and developmental disabilities and psychotropic medications were not considered in any of the hypothesis tests. Young men's intellectual and developmental disabilities may have influenced their capacity to engage in the discussion groups, as well as their experiences of safety. Age, race, and prior living situation are by no means an exhaustive list of personal characteristics that youth may consider relevant aspects of themselves and salient dimensions for judging others as either similar or different. Youth within ODYS may also have qualitatively different interactions with their peers and facility staff as a result of their disabilities, particularly if their disabilities are readily apparent to others, and hence elicit different treatment from their peers and authority figures. Young men who are also administered psychiatric medication, especially for the purposes of sedation, may also be less engaged in Council groups, and therefore may be expected to report less change in their behaviors and belief systems as a result of their exposure to the program. Future research that addresses the questions posed in this thesis should include measurement of these individual variables and include them in the analysis.

### **Lessons Learned**

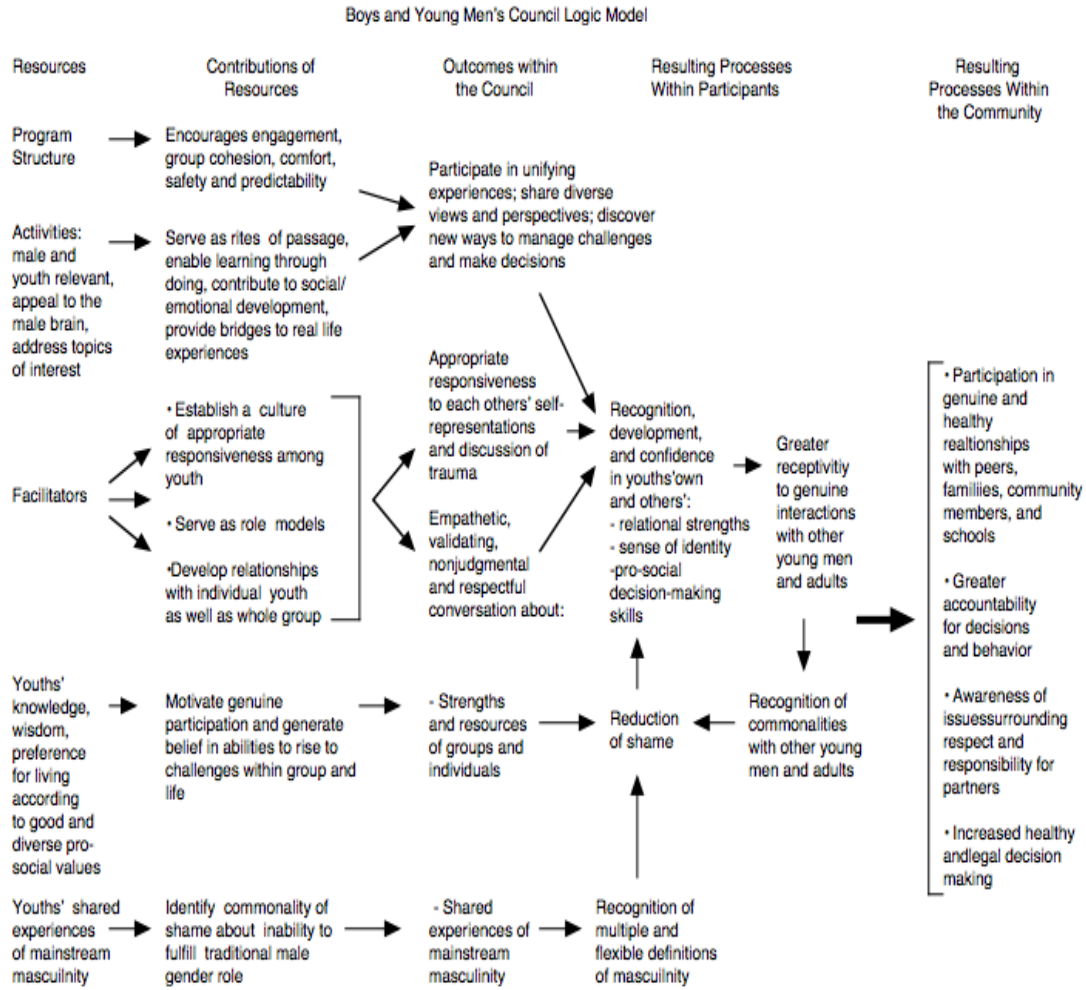
The inter-relatedness of young men's experiences of similarity, safety, and changes in their behaviors and belief systems may be most apparent in youth who

experience high personal investment and buy-in to The Council, and who are receptive to the possibility of growth through genuine participation in the program. As participants consider taking emotional risks and disclosing personal thoughts and feelings to their group, their experiences of safety and its precursors are likely to become salient. It is possible that the participants in this particular study did not place very much stock in The Council, and engaged in the program at only a superficial level regardless of the amount of safety that they experienced. A preliminary review of the qualitative data that the youth provided on the surveys used for the present analyses seem to indicate that this was the case. Many of the responses seemed flippant and glib, leading me to believe that many of the participants did not take The Council (or at least its evaluation) very seriously. If a group of Council participants had intentions of making themselves susceptible to the influence of their group members and potentially undergoing changes through self-disclosure and connection, the factors that enabled them to feel more comfortable making themselves vulnerable may have been identifiable. Conducting this research with voluntary participants in The Council would be more revealing about the relationships between similarity, emotional safety, and change within the program, if for no other reason than a greater likelihood of demonstrating positive change.

Despite the frequency of qualitative responses that seem to imply that the youth paid it little mind, I am also struck by the poignancy of some of their comments about their appreciation for The Council. The conflicting messages in the open-ended qualitative portion of the surveys, in conjunction with the unexpected pattern of change that many of the youth demonstrated and the relatively small group-level dependency of

their changes, leads me to believe that the youth in ODYS had a much more nuanced reaction to The Council than was captured in the surveys that they completed. While I was well aware of the prospect that youth would demonstrate little to no change over the course of their participation in the study, at no point in the thesis proposal process did it occur to me that youth might demonstrate *negative* change. In this context, where staying the same is a relatively positive outcome, perhaps the more relevant question is not which processes and features of other individuals enable youth to change, but which experiences help them retain positive aspects of themselves. Somewhat counter-intuitively, the findings of this thesis indicate that exposure to others who were different from themselves enabled this group of incarcerated youth to maintain their initial pro-social behavior and beliefs, a pattern worth further exploration in additional contexts and populations.

Appendix A: The Council Program Model



Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

<b>Form 3</b> <b>Boys Consent Form</b>
---

**BOYS COUNCIL Study Participant  
Consent Form**

Boy's Name:

\_\_\_\_\_ **Yes**, I want to  
participate in the  
Boys Council study. I  
know I can change  
my mind at any time.

\_\_\_\_\_

Boy's Signature:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ **No**, I do not want to  
participate in the  
Boys Council study.

Date: Mo/Day/Year

\_\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_/20\_\_\_\_

Phone Number:

\_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix C: Survey Questionnaire

**Boys & Young Men's Council Follow-up Survey****Cover Page**

1. What is your *birthdate*?

Month: \_\_\_\_\_

Day: \_\_ \_\_

Year: \_\_ \_\_ \_\_ \_\_

2. Last three digits of your DYS number:

### \_\_ \_\_ \_\_

3. Where do you live? (*Please CHECK the box that applies*)

Ohio River Valley

Circleville

4. Today's Date

\_\_ \_\_ / \_\_ \_\_ / 2009

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**Boys & Young Men's Council Survey**

Please answer these questions about yourself and your life. Please be as honest as possible, and remember if you don't want to answer a question you don't have to. **Please CIRCLE the answer that best applies to you. You can circle more than one answer.**

A1. Please <u>circle</u> your age:	13 yrs   14 yrs   15 yrs   16 yrs 17 yrs   18 yrs   19 yrs   20 yrs   21 yrs
A2. Please <u>circle</u> your race/ethnic identity: <i>(Please circle all that apply. If you do not identify with the categories provided, please write in your response)</i>	White   Asian   Latino/-a   Native American   African American Other: _____
A3. Who did you most recently live with before you came to Ohio Youth Services?	mother   father   mother and father   other family foster parent   group home Other: _____
A4. What languages do you speak?	English   Spanish   Other: _____

A5. Have you ever lived in a foster home or a group home?	yes	no	not sure
---	-----	----	----------

**Please CIRCLE the number that shows how often you do the following things at school.**

	Does not apply to me (N/A)	Never	Not Often	Half of the time	Often	Always
A6. I follow the rules at my school.	0	1	2	3	4	5
A7. I feel good about my school.	0	1	2	3	4	5
A8. I pay attention during my classes.	0	1	2	3	4	5

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**Boys & Young Men's Council Survey**

Please **CIRCLE** the number that shows how much you agree or disagree with the statement.

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Does not apply to me (N/A)
B1.	I am proud to be a boy/young man.	1	2	3	4	0
B2.	I have things in common with other youth in my group.	1	2	3	4	0
B3	I have good role models in my life.	1	2	3	4	0
B4.	I share my feelings with adults.	1	2	3	4	0
B5.	I am a good role model to boys who are younger than me.	1	2	3	4	0

C1.	I belong to a gang.	YES	NO	I did in the past, but not anymore
-----	---------------------	-----	----	------------------------------------

*If you circled YES in question C1 above, please answer the following questions.*

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Does not apply to me (N/A)
C2.	I plan to leave my gang during the next two months.	1	2	3	4	0
C3.	I plan to leave my gang during the next year.	1	2	3	4	0
C4.	I like being in my gang.	1	2	3	4	0

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**Boys & Young Men's Council Survey**

Please **CIRCLE** the number that shows how much you agree or disagree with the statement

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
D1.	It's important for a guy to act like nothing is wrong, even when something is bothering him.	1	2	3	4
D2.	In a good dating relationship, the guy gets his way most of the time.	1	2	3	4
D3.	I can respect a guy who backs down from a fight.	1	2	3	4
D4.	It's ok for a guy to say no to sex.	1	2	3	4
D5.	Guys should not let it show when their feelings are hurt.	1	2	3	4
D6.	A guy never needs to hit another guy to get respect	1	2	3	4
D7.	If a guy tells people his worries, he will look weak.	1	2	3	4
D8.	I think it's important for a guy to go after what he wants, even if it means hurting other people's feelings.	1	2	3	4
D9.	I think it's important for a guy to act like he is sexually active even if he is not.	1	2	3	4
D10.	I would be friends with a guy who is gay.	1	2	3	4
D11.	It's embarrassing for a guy when he needs to ask for help.	1	2	3	4
D12.	I think it's important for a guy to talk about his feelings, even if people might laugh at him.	1	2	3	4

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**Boys & Young Men's Council Survey**

This section asks about caring and cooperating. **Please CIRCLE how many times you did each activity or task in the last 30 days.**

	<b>In the last 30 days.....</b>	<b>Never</b>	<b>1 or 2 times</b>	<b>3 or 4 times</b>	<b>5 or more times</b>
E1.	I helped someone stay out of a fight.	0	1 or 2 times	3 or 4 times	5 or more times
E2.	I told other kids how I felt when they did something I liked.	0	1 or 2 times	3 or 4 times	5 or more times
E3.	I cooperated with others.	0	1 or 2 times	3 or 4 times	5 or more times
E4.	I told other kids how I felt when they upset me.	0	1 or 2 times	3 or 4 times	5 or more times
E5.	I protected someone from a "bully".	0	1 or 2 times	3 or 4 times	5 or more times
E6.	I gave someone a compliment.	0	1 or 2 times	3 or 4 times	5 or more times
E7.	I helped my peers solve a problem.	0	1 or 2 times	3 or 4 times	5 or more times

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**Boys & Young Men's Council Survey**

This section asks about ethnic pride and respect for differences. **Please CIRCLE the number that tells us how much you agree with the following statements.**

		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
F1.	I am proud to be a member of my racial/cultural group.	0	1	2	3	4
F2.	I am accepting of others regardless of their race, ethnicity, culture, or religion.	0	1	2	3	4
F3.	I would help someone regardless of their race.	0	1	2	3	4
F4.	I can get along with most people.	0	1	2	3	4

This section asks about confidence in reaching goals and staying out of fights. **Please CIRCLE the number that shows how much you agree or disagree with the statement.**

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
G1.	I will graduate from high school (or get my GED).	1	2	3	4
G2.	I will go to college.	1	2	3	4
G3.	I will get a job I really want.	1	2	3	4
G4.	I am confident in my ability to stay out of fights.	1	2	3	4
G5.	I don't need to fight because there are other ways to deal with anger.	1	2	3	4

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**Boys & Young Men's Council Survey**

People have different reasons for wanting to stop doing crime. **Please CIRCLE the number that shows how important each reason is for you.**

**If I stop doing crime...**

		<b>Not Important</b>	<b>Of Little Importance</b>	<b>Important</b>	<b>Very Important</b>
H1.	I will lose my tough image.	1	2	3	4
H2.	I will believe in myself.	1	2	3	4
H3.	The people I care about will be proud of me.	1	2	3	4
H4.	My associates will lose respect for me.	1	2	3	4
H5.	I will have better friends.	1	2	3	4
H6.	My family will respect me.	1	2	3	4
H7.	I will not feel a thrill.	1	2	3	4
H8.	I will be proud of myself.	1	2	3	4
H9.	My family will be more respected.	1	2	3	4
H10.	My friends will not respect me.	1	2	3	4
H11.	I will have more self-respect.	1	2	3	4
H12.	The people I care about will respect me for "getting my act together."	1	2	3	4
H13.	My family will not be accepted by the neighborhood.	1	2	3	4
H14.	I will feel better about myself.	1	2	3	4
H15.	The people I care about will trust me.	1	2	3	4

***PLEASE WAIT HERE FOR FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS***

**If I stop doing crime...**

		<b>Not Important</b>	<b>Of Little Importance</b>	<b>Important</b>	<b>Very Important</b>
H16.	My associates will lose a partner.	1	2	3	4
H17.	I will feel safer.	1	2	3	4
H18.	The people I care about will feel safe.	1	2	3	4
H19.	My friends will lose a partner.	1	2	3	4
H20.	I will not have to worry about getting arrested.	1	2	3	4
H21.	My family will be closer.	1	2	3	4
H22.	I will not feel powerful.	1	2	3	4
H23.	I will be happier.	1	2	3	4
H24.	The people I care about will feel more comfortable around me.	1	2	3	4
H25.	My family will have more respect for me.	1	2	3	4
H26.	I will not have to look over my shoulder.	1	2	3	4
H27.	I can help my family.	1	2	3	4
H28.	The people I love will be embarrassed if I got help.	1	2	3	4
H29.	I will feel proud of myself.	1	2	3	4
H30.	The people I taught how to do crime will not respect me.	1	2	3	4
H31.	I can be part of my neighborhood.	1	2	3	4
H32.	The people who taught me how to do crime will not respect me.	1	2	3	4



**Boys & Young Men's Council Satisfaction Survey**  
*For Post Survey and Follow-Up administrations only*

Please read the following statements and **CIRCLE** the number that represents how you felt when you were in Boys & Young Men's Council.

		Never	Sometimes	Usually	Always
S1.	I could say what I was thinking in Boys & Young Men's Council.	0	1	2	3
S2.	I could trust Boys & Young Men's Council leaders.	0	1	2	3
S3.	People were fair in Boys & Young Men's Council.	0	1	2	3
S4.	Everyone respected me in Boys & Young Men's Council.	0	1	2	3
S5.	Boys & Young Men's Council leaders focused on what I'm good at.	0	1	2	3
S6.	Boys & Young Men's Council was worth my time.	0	1	2	3
S7.	People kept things confidential in Boys & Young Men's Council.	0	1	2	3

S8.	What have you learned in Boys & Young Men's Council?

S9.	What have you learned about being male?
S10.	What have you liked and/or disliked about Boys & Young Men's Council?
S11.	Have you changed in any way after being a part of Boys & Young Men's Council?

Thank you!

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