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The Relationship Between Supportive Friendships, Conflictual Friendships, and Deviance During Emerging Adulthood

Thomas J. Mowen¹ and John H. Boman IV¹

¹Bowling Green State University, OH, USA

Abstract

As deviant behavior is increasing during emerging adulthood and friends are a driving force behind deviance, the goal of this study is to explore the relationships between friend support, conflict, and crime. Using a large sample of friendship pairs and developmental interpretations of social control and differential association theories, a series of mixed models are estimated, which investigate the roles of support, conflict, and peer deviance on an individual's self-reported property crime. Results demonstrate that high levels of support and conflict relate to less offending in both independent and interdependent ways. However, neither social control nor differential association can provide a clear explanation to these findings, even though support and conflict clearly seem important for offending during emerging adulthood.

Keywords

deviance; friendships; support; conflict; emerging adulthood; dyads

Introduction

Criminological research, theory, and practice over the past several decades has demonstrated a firm understanding that peers and friends are central factors in determining the amount of crime a person commits during late adolescence and emerging adulthood (e.g., Pratt et al., 2010; also see Hoebe, Meldrum, Walker, & Young, 2016). Despite an extensive knowledge base on how peers and friends provide opportunities for crime (Osgood & Anderson, 2004; Osgood, Wilson, O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 1996), how closeness to friends aids in the transmission of peer influence (e.g., Dishion & Tipsord, 2011; Giordano, Cernkovich, & Pugh, 1986; Weerman & Smeenk, 2005), and how social networks play into these issues (e.g., Haynie, 2002; Haynie & Osgood, 2005; McGloin & Piquero, 2010), there are a number of key questions that remain in regard to how friends can influence behavior in various settings (see Warr, 2002). One such area involves the potential for behavioral differences stemming from having friendships marked by close levels of support as opposed to friendships that are marked by high levels of conflict.

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Corresponding Author: John H. Boman IV, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Bowling Green State University, 240 Williams Hall, Bowling Green, OH 43403, USA. jboman@bgsu.edu.

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Two theories—Hirschi’s (1969) social control theory and Sutherland’s (1947) differential association theory—speak directly to the possibility of peer support and peer conflict carrying independent (via main effects) and interdependent (via interactions) relationships with criminal behavior during the developmental stage of emerging adulthood. In addition to theorizing that weakened bonds and low stakes in conformity are the primary source of crime, Hirschi also believes these same things should break apart friendships. The implication of the weakened friendships among those who are marked by low social bonds is that persons who are in “cold and brittle” friendships should be highly deviant because of their low levels of social bonds within that friendship. As such, Hirschi would expect high levels of peer support to protect from crime because supportive peers should be closely bonded to one another. Inversely, social control theory would expect that high levels of conflict would be indicative of very low levels of bonds, thereby insinuating that conflict should be related to increased deviance. Hirschi’s theory, however, goes beyond simply positing how the main effects of peer support and peer conflict may relate to crime. Hirschi’s proposition that weak bonds should not only cause crime, but also fracture friendships, suggests—implicitly, if not explicitly—that the presence of conflict (as an indicator of a lack of bonds) should weaken the relationship that peer support (as an indicator of high bonds) has on criminal behavior.

In a similar vein, the juxtaposition between having close, warm relationships versus friendships interceded by conflict also lies at the heart of Sutherland’s (1947) differential association theory. Sutherland describes how the extent to which “differential associates” (p. 7)—defined in this study as friends (see the distinction made between peers and friends by Kreager, 2004)—can vary in frequency, intensity, duration, and priority. In laying out these “modalities of association,” Sutherland was arguing for a greater magnitude of behavioral influence from friends who were closely tied to the actor for a long time (duration and priority), who shared close personal ties (intensity), and with whom the actor interacted most frequently (frequency). Accordingly, Sutherland’s theory—in opposition to Hirschi’s—would dismiss the importance of the main effects of friend support and conflict. Instead, Sutherland’s perspective hinges on an interdependent relationship between support, conflict, and peer behavior. Supportive friendships with deviant peers should amplify the effect of friend deviance on the actor’s crime because these friendships probably have high levels of frequency, intensity, duration, and priority. Inversely, conflictual friendships with deviant peers likely indicate that the friendship lacks the modalities of association, insinuating that the effect of peer deviance on the actor’s behavior would be significantly weakened by conflict with the friend.

Accordingly, Hirschi’s (1969) social control theory and Sutherland’s (1947) differential association build upon one another to offer a comprehensive viewpoint into how levels of friend support, friend conflict, and peer behavior could coexist and interact during a period of development when some people’s crime is decreasing (Moffitt, 1993) while other people’s is rapidly increasing (Bushway, Thornberry, & Krohn, 2003; Laub & Sampson, 1993; Piquero, 2008; Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2003). At the same time, these theories conflict; Hirschi’s theory rests on the contention that strong bonds protect from crime, whereas Sutherland’s theory hypothesizes that strong bonds with the “wrong” people could amplify crime. Building upon this theoretical entanglement, the current study uses

dyadic data to explore the relationships between support from a friend, conflict with a friend, and involvement in property crime. Before discussing our specific goals, however, we discuss recent literature on peer closeness, peer conflict, and crime.

Closeness, Conflict, and Crime

Dating back nearly a century, anthropologists, ethnographers, and sociologists have routinely described how criminals have close friendships with one another. For instance, Thrasher's (1927) ethnography of gangs depicted friends who were close and shared warm ties with one another. Similarly, in his life event history analysis of a juvenile delinquent, Shaw (1930) described how the friendships he experienced changed over time, although they were—nearly without exception—characterized by high levels of closeness, especially in late adolescence and emerging adulthood. Furthermore, Glueck and Glueck's (1950) research emphasized the importance of friendship closeness, setting the stage for the formation of social control theory (Hirschi, 1969) and social learning theory (Burgess & Akers, 1966) while simultaneously making a focus on friendships central to the developmental and life-course perspective on crime.

More recent research finds support for the notion that the friendships of deviants are warm and closely bonded. For instance, Kandel (1978) found that adolescent friends who used drugs were significantly more closely attached to one another, a finding that has been echoed by Krohn and Thornberry (1993). Furthermore, Giordano and colleagues (1986) concluded that those involved in deviance are more likely to stick up for one another. Studying friendship closeness, Piehler and Dishion (2007) concluded that the closest and most harmonious friendships were found in the most deviant friendship pairs. Similarly, Giordano, Lonardo, Manning, & Longmore (2010) and Boman, Krohn, Gibson, and Stogner (2012) concluded that deviant friendships are close overall (also see Piehler & Dishion, 2007), suggesting that Hirschi's "cold and brittle" hypothesis may be oversimplified during the developmental periods of late adolescence and emerging adulthood.

Despite overall findings suggesting that deviant friends share warm relationships, research also finds exceptions to this general trend as several studies find that friendships among deviants may be more conflictual. Both Giordano and colleagues (2010), studying adolescents, and Boman and colleagues (2012), studying emerging adults, also concluded higher levels of conflict also exist in deviant friendships, thereby backing the presumption that the areas of support and conflict may coexist (also see Boman, Stogner, & Miller, 2013). In short, the conflict that stems from these friendships is certainly associated with involvement in deviant behavior (e.g., Boman et al., 2013). However, outside of these few studies, little is known about how conflict with friends relates to criminal activity during emerging adulthood.

Instead, the majority of the literature that jointly looks at closeness and conflict is found in populations undergoing the process of reentry, or the time after one is released from prison and is attempting to reestablish himself or herself in the community. Upon release from prison, support from peers has been found to protect against recidivism (Visher & Travis, 2003; see Grieb et al., 2014). Part of the reason why close ties with normative peers during

reentry protect from crime is because they provide the returning person with close ties to normative influences (e.g., Hlavka, Wheelock, & Jones, 2015; Stansfield, Mowen, O'Connor, & Boman, 2017; Western, Braga, Davis, & Sirois, 2015). Despite the relevant findings, persons who undergo reentry are frequently situated within different developmental stages due to different lengths of incarceration. Furthermore, the process of returning from prison is a unique life event experienced by a fraction of the population, thereby making these findings relevant, albeit perhaps not generalizable, to a more "general" population of emerging adults as in this study.

Friend Behavior: What I Think or What They Really Do?

A final issue that bears on results from this study concerns the method through which peer deviance is measured. Despite knowing that the behavior of friends and peers is imperative for a person's own behavior during emerging adulthood (Warr, 2002), the measurement of the construct of deviant peers requires scrutiny. During both late adolescence and emerging adulthood, persons are generally asked to report their perception of the criminal offending of their friends (see Akers, 2009). While this practice is common, it is relatively well understood that people incorrectly insert their own behavior in lieu of their friend's behavior. The two processes of projection (Newcomb, 1961; Rebellon & Modecki, 2014) and rejection (Boman & Ward, 2014) join together to increase the coefficient of the perceptual measure of friend behavior (e.g., Young, Rebellon, Barnes, & Weerman, 2014), thereby overtaking a good portion of the variance in the model due to the outcome (self-reported crime) being very correlated to a predictor (the respondent's perceptions of the friend's crime; see Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990).

In studies of how friends may influence each other, attempting to circumvent the problems of projection is critical (Haynie & Osgood, 2005). The alternative is to measure the self-reported deviance of the friend himself or herself (Weerman & Smeenk, 2005), which is a type of measure that carries high validity (see Krohn, Thornberry, Gibson, & Baldwin, 2010). However, using self-report measures from peers is difficult because doing so requires data that are either based on friendship pairs (dyads) or social networks (see Kandel, 1996). An advantage to the current study is that dyadic data are used, therefore allowing for an examination into friend support and conflict while accounting for (a) the respondent's perception of his or her friend's behavior as well as (b) the friend's actual behavior. This raises attention to the goals of the current study.

Current Study

Building upon the versatile nature of the social control (Hirschi, 1969) and differential association (Sutherland, 1947) frameworks, the current study uses data from a large sample of friends nested within dyads during emerging adulthood to explore the relationships between self-reported property crime, friend support, friend conflict, and the property crime of a friend. Specifically, we have four research questions, the first two which stem primarily from social control and the latter two from differential association. First, does a person's level of support and conflict with a friend relate to behavior once the peer's behavior is controlled? Hirschi's social control perspective leads us to expect (Hypothesis 1 [H1]) that

high levels of support and low levels of conflict, both as markers of close bonds, will be independently related to less self-reported property crime from the respondent. Second, does friend support and conflict share an interdependent relationship with self-reported offending behavior? Because support and conflict can coexist (e.g., Giordano et al., 1986, 2010), we believe (Hypothesis 2 [H2]) that the strong bond indicator of support will condition away a portion of the effect of the weak bond indicator of conflict.

Third, does friend support interact with the friend's behavior in relation to property crime? Drawing from Sutherland's (1947) theory's ability to explain the interaction between support, conflict, and peer behavior, we expect (Hypothesis 3 [H3]) that the strong relationship between the friend's property offending and the respondent's property offending will be significantly amplified by high levels of support from a friend. That is, we believe the "intensity" modality will increase the overall importance of the friend's property crime for the offending patterns of the actor. Fourth, and finally, does conflict with the friend share a joint relationship with the friend's behavior in relation to property crime? Also approaching this issue from the perspective of Sutherland, we expect (Hypothesis 4 [H4]) conflict—as an indicator of low levels of intensity—to significantly weaken the extent to which the friend's property crime relates to the actor's property crime.

Throughout this study, we use two different measures that seemingly capture the friend's property offending. Because there are substantive reasons to believe that a person's perceptions of a friend's property crime are not synonymous with the peer's self-reported property crime, we investigate these issues with both (a) the respondent's perception of the friend's property offending and (b) a self-reported measure of property crime coming straight from the friend himself or herself. In the instance that the perception and the friend's self-reported property crime are not highly similar, using both measures will allow us to provide as comprehensive of a test of the research questions and hypotheses as possible.

Method

Data

Data for this project originate from an original data collection on friendship pairs (dyads). The data were collected during the spring semester of 2009 at a major university in the southeastern United States. The participants in the study are undergraduate students enrolled in the university during the semester which the study was conducted. With the exception of a very few friendship dyads containing nontraditional students, the participants are in the midst of the emerging adulthood stage of the life-course (M age = 19.349, SD = 1.439).

To collect the sample, the principal investigator (PI) of the study contacted the instructors of the largest 50 classes that were offered on the campus that semester. The professors were asked if they would award extra credit to their students for participating in a friendship-level study that was being conducted. Of the 50 course instructors who were contacted, 24 said they would allow the study to be used as a form of extra credit in their courses. The amount of points awarded varied from course to course.

The PI and/or a member of the research team made in-class visits to the selected classes. Potential participants were informed that to receive credit, they would have to come to the study's headquarters for an in-person, paper-based survey during standard operating hours. Instead of attending alone, however, each person was required to bring one of their five best friends who were also currently in undergraduate studies at the same university. Upon arriving at the study site, participants completed informed consent, were separated, and were then given identical paper surveys to complete. Surveys were marked with identifying dyadic numbers to link the two friends and asked questions about the respondent, the friend, and the friendship. Survey completion rooms were monitored by a member of the research team to ensure no communication between the friends occurred during survey administration. Upon completing the study, each person left the study site via separate exits.

In total, there were about 5,000 people in the selected courses. Because of the sheer number of people and the incentive, data were collected from 2,154 people nested within 1,077 friendships. Due to the large number of classes offering the study, both dyadic members were awarded extra credit occasionally (about 20% of the time). By extension, the most common incentive a friend received for participation was simply helping the person in an enrolled class receive extra credit. No one was allowed to participate with multiple friends, meaning each dyad contained unique individuals.

Dataset Structure

Dyadic data can be structured in several different ways (e.g., Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). The current study uses a double-entry file, which situates all dyadic information on two lines of data. On the first line, Person A's information is entered first and is then followed by Person B's information, making Person B nested within Person A. On the second line, Person B's information comes first and Person A's data is second, therefore making Person A also nested within Person B. The person who comes first is called the "actor," and the person coming second is called the "friend" (see Campbell & Kashy, 2002). As such, the actor's behavior is treated as the outcome and the friend's information is a predictor, a point to which we now turn.

Measures

Dependent variable.—The outcome variable in the current study is a scale of the actor's self-reported property crimes committed over the past 12 months. Four items asked the actor whether he or she had (a) vandalized property belonging to a neighbor, friend, or roommate; (b) vandalized school property; (c) vandalized other property; and (d) broken in to a building to steal something. Items were all scaled on the National Youth Survey (see Elliott, Huizinga, & Ageton, 1985) metric of "0," indicating the respondent had never committed the behaviors, to "8," indicating that the respondent had committed the behavior at a frequency of several times a day. To create a scale of the actor's self-reported *property crime*, the items were summed and divided by four to create an average item score scale ($M = 0.112$, $SD = 0.300$, range = 0-8; Cronbach's $\alpha = .72$). Descriptive statistics of all measures are displayed in Table 1.

Independent variables.—This study has four focal independent variables of interest. The first, *support from the friend*, is composed of four items that asked the actor (a) if the friend would be supportive if others were bothering him or her, (b) if the friend would stick up for him or her in the event that someone was giving them trouble, (c) if he or she can talk to the friend about problems, and (d) if the friend can be confided in and trusted with secrets. These items were adapted for use from Bukowski, Hoza, and Boivin's (1994) Friendship Qualities Scale. Although originally intended for use on children, this scale has been demonstrated to be valid and reliable in college samples as respondents find the items easy to answer (Brendgen, Markiewicz, Doyle, & Bukowski, 2001; Saferstein, Neimeyer, & Hagans, 2005).

The opinion-based questions capturing friend support were scaled on a 5-point, Likert-type measure (1 = *not true*, 2 = *mostly not true*, 3 = *somewhat true*, 4 = *mostly true*, 5 = *really true*). To construct the scale of peer support, the four items were summed, and higher scores on peer support indicate more support from the peer ($M = 16.289$, $SD = 2.978$, minimum = 4, maximum = 20). In addition to scaling consistently ($\alpha = .80$), a principal components analysis (PCA) and its accompanying scree plot demonstrated strong evidence of unidimensionality in the measure, as the first item captured 64% of the proportionate variance.

The second independent variable of central interest is *conflict with the friend*. This scale, also adapted from Bukowski and colleague's (1994) research and using the same 5-point metric, asked the actor whether (a) he or she can get into fights with the friend (an item intentionally left open for interpretation), (b) the friend can annoy the actor, (c) the actor and the friend argue often, and (d) the actor and friend disagree about many things. To construct the scale of friend conflict, each item was reverse coded and items were summed. As such, higher scores capture higher amounts of conflict with the friend ($M = 14.568$, $SD = 3.501$, minimum = 4, maximum = 20). Again, this scale is unidimensional (73% proportional explained variance on the first item in a PCA) and reliable ($\alpha = .78$).

The third predictor measure is *perceived property crime of the friend*. The actor was asked to report on his or her perception of his or her friend's involvement in property crime over the past 12 months. The items asked (a) if the friend had vandalized property belonging to a neighbor, friend, or roommate; (b) if the friend had vandalized property belonging to a school; (c) if the friend had vandalized other property; and (d) whether the friend had broken into a building to steal something. The items, which were combined to capture the average item response, were adapted from the National Youth Survey (Elliott et al., 1985) and were designed to "match" the dependent variable precisely. Similar to the outcome, higher scores capture higher amounts of perceived property crime of the friend ($M = 0.060$, $SD = 0.261$, range = 0-8), and the scale showed strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .83$).

The fourth and final independent measure is the *friend's self-reported property crime*. Although constructed in exactly the same way as the dependent variable, this measure is distinct due to the nesting of the datafile in the double-entry type structure (see Kenny et al., 2006). Once again, the average item response was taken ($M = 0.115$, $SD = 0.312$, range =

0-8). The friend's self-reported property crime scales acceptably ($\alpha = .72$) and is coded so that higher scores capture higher frequency of a friend's property offending.

Control variables.—The following analyses—described in more detail momentarily—carry the ability to control for characteristics of the actor and the friend. Accordingly, several characteristics of the actor and the friend are used in analyses. First, the *sex* of the actor and peer are covaried. Males (coded “1”) are compared with females (“0”). Overall, just more than one third of the sample is male (33.5%). In addition, the *age* of the actor and the friend are controlled. The average age in the data is 19.349 years with a standard deviation of 1.439 years. Approximately 99% of the sample's age falls within what could be considered the age range of a “traditional” college sample (18-23 years old). The *race* of the actor and friend are also controlled. Specifically, non-White actors and friends (coded “1”) are compared with Whites (“0”). Approximately 37% of the sample is non-White. Finally, we control for the actor and friend being of Hispanic ethnicity (“1”; contrast is non-Hispanic). This item, which was separate from the item capturing race, indicates that 18.7% of the sample is of Hispanic origin.

Analytic Strategy

Being that the sample is composed of persons who self-selected into friendships, it is likely that any actor would be more similar to his or her friend than another random person in the data. At the same time, however, actors and friends within the same dyad also vary, meaning that a form of analysis is required that is able to capture both differences between dyads as well as differences within dyads. A class of dyadic models called “actor partner interdependence models” (APIMs) are quite well suited for this task. The APIM uses mixture modeling to account for the fact that there are two sources of variation—within-person variance and between-dyad variance (see Kenny et al., 2006).

Although there are many different types of APIM models, the current project proceeds by estimating two-level, APIM-class, mixed effects models. Mixed effects models are quite advantageous due to their ability to capture multiple sources of variance via both a fixed effect and random intercept (Rabe-Hesketh & Skrondal, 2012). As such, Level 1 of the forthcoming models contains the focal variables of interest. The actor's self-reported property crime will be regressed onto variables from both the actor and friend in the Level 1 equation. The Level 2 equation, on the contrary, contains no focal variables of interest. In this case, it is called the “grouping” equation as it allows for the Level 1 equation to be estimated while taking into account dyadic-level variation.

Due to the inclusion of interaction terms as well as two separate markers representing the friend's property crime (the actor's perception and the friend's self-report), a model building procedure is used. Two series of mixed models will be estimated. The first series uses the actor's perception of the friend's property crime as the marker of peer deviance. The second removes this measure and replaces it with the friend's self-reported property crime. In both model series, the first model (Model 1) is a main effects model that includes friend support, friend conflict, and the marker of the friend's property crime. The Model 2 steps in an interaction term that is the product of Friend Support $\times$ Peer Conflict. After removing this

interaction, Model 3 inserts an interaction investigating the joint relationship of friend support and the friend's property crime. Finally, this interaction is replaced by an interaction exploring for an interdependent association between conflict with the friend and the marker representing the friend's property crime in Model 4. All interaction terms were created from grand mean centered main effect variables (see Hoffman & Gavin, 1998).

Missing data were a relatively minor problem in this project. Specifically, all items had less than 1% missing, with the exception of the actor's and friend's sex, race, age, and ethnicity, all of which had no missing values. With an initial sample size of 2,154 persons nested within 1,077 friendships, sample power was a nonissue. Accordingly, we chose to keep models conservative instead of imputing missing values, and thus removed actors from the data who (a) had a missing value in any of their own measures used in this analysis and/or (b) had a friend who had a missing value on any analysis variable. This deleted 162 actors, leaving us with a final sample size of 1,992 actors with complete friend data. All models were estimated in Stata (v. 14.2).

Results

Bivariate Analyses

Prior to presenting results from mixed models, we provide a series of basic, but informative, correlation statistics among key measures used in the analysis (reported only in text). The measure of support from the friend and conflict with the friend are not significantly correlated ($r = .021$). Also, the actor's perception of the friend's property crime (which is used in the first series of models) is also only weakly to moderately correlated ($r = .183$, $p = .001$) with the friend's self-reported property offending (used in Model Series 2), clearly indicating that the friend's behavior differs considerably from the actor's perception of it. At the bivariate level, the outcome measure—the actor's self-reported property crime—is weakly, but significantly, correlated with both friend support ($r = -.116$, $p = .001$) and friend conflict ($r = -.110$, $p = .001$) in a negative direction. The outcome measure, however, is much more related to the actor's perception of the friend's property crime ($r = .548$, $p = .001$) than it is the peer's self-reported property crime ($r = .120$, $p = .001$).

Perceptual Peer Property Crime

A series of mixed models presented in Table 2 regress the actor's self-reported property crime onto levels of friend support, friend conflict, the actor's perception of his or her friend's property crime, and controls. In Model 1, the main effects model, friend support reaches statistical significance in a negative direction, indicating that lower levels of friend support are related to higher amounts of property crime committed by an actor. Although conflict does not reach statistical significance, the actor's perception of the friend's property crime does, indicating that actors who have perceived high levels of property offending are more likely to have committed property crime themselves. The only control variable that reaches significance, however, is the actor's sex. Male actors have committed significantly higher amounts of property crime than female actors.

Model 2 introduces an interaction term that represents the product of friend support and friend conflict on the actor's self-reported property offending. This interaction term does not approach statistical significance, and the results appear quite consistent to those presented in Model 1.

However, an interaction term introduced into Model 3—the interaction between the actor's support received from the friend and his or her perception of the friend's property crime—does reach significance. The direction of this interaction suggests that higher levels of support from the friend significantly reduce the strong relationship between the actor's perception of the friend's property crime and his or her own offending. In addition, the inclusion of this interaction has slightly increased the coefficient and decreased the standard error of friend conflict so that this main effect is now statistically significant.

Model 4 stages in an interaction of friend conflict and the actor's perception of the friend's behavior. The main effect of friend conflict drops back below the traditional level of statistical significance, although it maintains a p value below .10. Despite a main effect that is not technically statistically significant, the interaction between friend conflict and the actor's perception of the friend's property crime reaches high levels of significance in this model. The positive direction of the interaction indicates that conflict with the friend escalates the amount to which the actor's perception of the friend's property crime relates to his or her own property crime. Again, the control measures remain consistent with the prior models.

Self-Reported Peer Property Crime

A series of mixed effects models presented in Table 3 replace the perceptual indicator of the friend's property crime with a self-report of property offending gathered directly from the peer himself or herself. In Model 1, several measures reach levels of statistical significance. Both friend support and friend conflict reach levels of statistical significance in a negative direction, suggesting that actors who have higher levels of friend support and higher levels of friend conflict have committed less property crime. The latter finding—that higher levels of conflict relate to less offending—is opposite in direction as to what would be expected. The friend's self-reported property crime is also significant in a positive direction, indicating that actors are more likely to commit property crime when their friends do the same. Furthermore, male actors and younger actors are more likely to have committed higher amounts of property offending. Finally, actors who have older friends have also committed significantly higher amounts of property crime than actors with younger friends.

Model 2 stages in an interaction of Friend Support $\times$ Friend Conflict. This interaction reaches levels of statistical significance in a positive direction. However, although significant, the interaction term has an extremely small coefficient magnitude ($b = .001$) and is only driven to significance due to having a very small standard error. Thus, although this interaction does appear to have some association with behavior while the peer's self-reported property offending is included in the model, the magnitude of this relationship is quite weak.

In Models 3 and 4, interaction terms of the friend's self-reported property crime and friend support (Model 3) and friend conflict (Model 4) are entered into the equation. However, neither of these interactions approach levels of statistical significance and the significance patterns of the other variables in the equations remain relatively constant. As such, while these two interactions appear to be of behavioral importance when controlling for the actor's perception of the friend's property crime, they are clearly unimportant when controlling for the actual property offending of the friend.

Discussion

The goal of this project was to examine the role of peer support and peer conflict on property crime. Overall, the hypotheses building upon Hirschi's (1969) social control perspective have received mixed support. Regarding H1, we see that higher amounts of support do relate to less crime, as Hirschi would expect. However, high amounts of conflict are also related to less property crime, particularly in the peer self-reported models. As conflict insinuates lower bonds, this does not support Hirschi's tenets. Also drawing upon Hirschi's expectations, H2 stated that conflict would condition away the relationship between support and crime. Although we observed a significant interaction, the strength of the coefficient was nearly zero, thereby leading us to reject H2.

Although at least some of Hirschi's expectations were met, the same cannot be said for Sutherland's (1947). Specifically, higher levels of friend support *weakened* the relationship between perceived peer property offending and self-reported property offending, leading to the rejection of H3. Also, H4 is rejected as higher levels of conflict *increased* the relationship between perceptual peer deviance and self-reported property offending. Collectively, both these findings run directly counter to Sutherland's expectation that high levels of intensity, or friend support, will enhance the effect of the friend's behavior on crime. As such, we conclude by assessing the findings of these hypotheses within the broader context of social control and differential association theory.

Although social control and differential association perspectives can certainly build upon one another in regard to how friend support and friend conflict may relate to crime, the theories together appear to carry little-to-no explanatory value for understanding the relationships between these mechanisms of friendships, the deviance of friends, and crime. Accordingly, our findings mesh nicely with those of Giordano and colleagues (1986), who concluded that the theories, and especially Hirschi's, "oversimplified the nature of delinquents' friendship relations" (p. 1170). However, as friend support and conflict can both be seen through the viewpoints of both theories, Hirschi and Sutherland alike appear to have hit on important mechanisms of criminal behavior during the critical developmental stage of emerging adulthood. Perhaps ironically, though, neither theory seems to have the capability of providing a correct theoretical take on why support and conflict "matter" for criminal behavior.

Although our findings illustrate the inability of Hirschi's and Sutherland's theories to explain the issues at hand, the results—interestingly—may support another theory. Colvin's (2000) differential coercion and social support theory—an integrated and developmentally

relevant theory—suggests, among other things, that mechanisms of social support should reduce criminal behavior (Colvin, Cullen, & Vander Ven, 2002). Furthermore, this notion has received some empirical support (Unnever, Colvin, & Cullen, 2004). Our failure to reject the part of H1 focused on friend support—though it was framed in Hirschi's (1969) theory—also meets expectations proposed by Colvin and colleagues. Furthermore, our measure of friend support fits into what they define as an “expressive” support (see Colvin et al., 2002). As such, this raises attention to the possibility that differential coercion and social support theory may be capable of explaining the issues here in a more comprehensive way than social control or differential association. However, Colvin and colleague's theory is extremely complex as it intertwines micro- and macro-level processes into elements of strain (e.g., Agnew, 1992), self-control (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990), and differential association (Sutherland, 1947), and the data we use cannot offer a complete test of the theory due to a lack of necessary measures. Instead, we direct future research to investigate this as a possible, and potentially valuable, means of understanding the process through which friend support and conflict could be driving criminal behavior.

Going beyond theory, and quite in line with our general expectations as well as prior research (e.g., Meldrum, Young, & Weerman, 2009), we find that the effects of the theoretical variables as both main effects and interactions are dependent on the type of peer delinquency measure used within the models. Overall, differential association and social learning theory would rely on the assumption that perceptual measures should more strongly relate to self-reported offending than the peer's actual criminal involvement (see Akers, 2009). While indeed this has occurred, the interactions that were significant in the perceptual models were in the opposite directions than differential association and social learning would predict. Although peer self-reported deviance carries a strong positive relationship with behavior on its own, the choice of which peer deviance measure to use does not appear to change the theoretical findings from the overall results of this study. Regardless of the type of peer deviance measure used, our prior point on how both theories appear to oversimplify the nature of friend support and conflict on criminal behavior remains valid.

Of course, there are important limitations that must be acknowledged regarding this study. First, while dyads are a strength of this study, the use of pairs of friends “minimizes the role of the larger group” (Giordano et al., 1986, p. 1183). As such, the use of dyads is both a strength and a weakness to this study as dyads are not larger friendship networks, and individuals typically have more than one close friend who carries the potential to influence crime during late adolescence and emerging adulthood (Weerman & Smeenk, 2005). Second, the data come from only one university, thereby restricting generalizability. This concern, however, may be tempered by the observation that students in college do not behave much differently from those in “high risk” samples (Wiecko, 2010), although there is certainly a higher need to replicate findings from college samples (Peterson & Merunka, 2014). Third, the data are cross-sectional, meaning we can only address relationships, not causal relationships. Fourth, and finally, we only use one form of offending, and results for other forms (e.g., substance use, violence) could certainly differ. Despite some limitations, this study nonetheless demonstrates the ability (or lack thereof) of Hirschi's and Sutherland's theories to explain the roles of friend support and conflict on behavior during a very criminogenic stage of the life-course (see Bushway et al., 2003; Moffit, 1993).

Conclusion

The exhaustive meta-analysis of Pratt and colleagues (2010) demonstrated that Sutherland's differential association perspective consistently outperforms Hirschi's control perspective in its ability to explain crime during adolescence and emerging adulthood. This study provides for the rare example of one that cannot corroborate the major findings of prior works (see Hoeben et al., 2016). While both theories can indeed contribute to the overall explanation of crime and appear to have tapped into important factors of friend support and conflict, both theories appear to grossly oversimplify the behavioral implications of support and conflict during emerging adulthood. Because a sizable portion of offenders are just beginning to commit crime during this developmental period (Laub & Sampson, 1993; Piquero, 2008), bolstering our understanding for why social control and differential association theories are bereft of such an explanation is of critical importance.

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Biography

Thomas J. Mowen is an assistant professor of sociology at Bowling Green State University. His recent work applies criminology theory to understand the role, and importance, of family in reentry and how school punishment relates to youth and family outcomes. His recent work has appeared in *Justice Quarterly*, *Journal of Research in Crime & Delinquency*, and *Criminology & Public Policy*.

John H. Boman IV is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at Bowling Green State University. His research focuses primarily on the role of peers and friends on crime and development, substance use, construct validation and measurement, and gender. Some of his recent work appears in *Criminology & Public Policy*, *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, and the *British Journal of Criminology*.

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Table 1.Descriptive Statistics of Measures in Dyadic Sample ($n = 1,992$).

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Minimum	Maximum
Dependent variable				
Actor's self-reported property crime	0.112	0.300	0	8
Independent variables				
Support from friend	16.289	2.978	4	20
Conflict with friend	14.658	3.501	4	20
Perceptual property crime of friend	0.060	0.261	0	8
Friend's self-reported property crime	0.115	0.312	0	8
Control variables				
Male (=1)	0.335	0.472	0	1
Age	19.349	1.439	18	42
Non-White (=1)	0.368	0.482	0	1
Hispanic (=1)	0.187	0.390	0	1

Table 2.

Mixed Models Regressing the Actor's Self-Reported Property Crime Onto Support, Conflict, and the Actor's Perception of the Friend's Property Crime ($n = 1,992$).

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Level 1: Independent variables								
Support from friend	-.004	.002**	-.004	.002*	-.004	.002*	-.004	.002*
Conflict with friend	-.003	.002	-.003	.002	-.003	.002*	-.003	.002
Perceptual friend property crime	.606	.022***	.605	.022***	.537	.025***	.645	.026***
Support $\times$ Conflict	—	—	.001	.001	—	—	—	—
Support $\times$ Perceived Property Crime	—	—	—	—	-.044	.007***	—	—
Conflict $\times$ Perceived Property Crime	—	—	—	—	—	—	.018	.006**
Level 1: Actor controls								
Male	.098	.013***	.097	.013***	.100	.013***	.097	.013***
Age	-.007	.005	-.007	.005	-.007	.004	-.007	.005
Non-White	.001	.014	.002	.014	.000	.014	-.000	.014
Hispanic	.006	.015	.006	.015	.009	.015	.007	.015
Level 1: Friend controls								
Male	-.015	.013	-.015	.013	-.015	.013	-.016	.013
Age	.004	.005	.005	.005	.003	.004	.004	.005
Non-White	-.010	.014	-.010	.014	-.007	.014	-.009	.014
Hispanic	-.000	.015	-.000	.015	-.002	.015	-.000	.015
Intercept	.210	.095*	.211	.095*	.231	.094*	.218	.095*
Level 2								
σ	.000		.000		.000		.000	
τ	.060		.060		.059		.060	
Model statistic								
Wald χ^2	966.98***		971.11***		1,020.18***		979.01***	

*
p .05.

**
p .01.

.100' d

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Table 3.

Mixed Models Regressing the Actor's Self-Reported Property Crime Onto Support, Conflict, and the Friend's Self-Reported Property Crime ($n = 1,992$).

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Level 1: Independent variables								
Support from friend	-.006	.002**	-.006	.002**	-.006	.002**	-.006	.002**
Conflict with friend	-.006	.002***	-.007	.002***	-.006	.002***	-.006	.002***
Friend self-reported property crime	.074	.021***	.074	.021***	.075	.023***	.062	.023**
Support $\times$ Conflict	—	—	.001*	—	—	—	—	—
Support $\times$ Friend's Property Crime	—	—	—	—	.000	.006	—	—
Conflict $\times$ Friend's Property Crime	—	—	—	—	—	—	-.007	.006
Level 1: Actor controls								
Male	.127	.016***	.126	.016***	.127	.016***	.128	.016***
Age	-.014	.005**	-.014	.005**	-.014	.005*	-.013	.005*
Non-White	-.013	.016	-.012	.016	-.013	.016	-.013	.016
Hispanic	.022	.018	.022	.018	.022	.018	.021	.018
Level 1: Friend controls								
Male	.015	.016	.016	.016	.015	.016	.015	.016
Age	.011	.005*	.012	.005*	.011	.005*	.011	.005*
Non-White	-.003	.016	-.002	.016	-.003	.016	-.002	.016
Hispanic	-.020	.018	-.020	.018	-.020	.018	-.021	.018
Intercept	.296	.111**	.297	.111**	.295	.112**	.297	.111**
Level 2								
σ	.000		.000		.000		.000	
τ	.083		.082		.083		.083	
Model statistic								
Wald χ^2	171.48***		177.06***		171.48***		173.29***	

*
p .05.**
p .01.

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