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**COMMUNICATING SOCIAL SUPPORT BEHIND BARS:
EXPERIENCES WITH THE PENNSYLVANIA LIFERS' ASSOCIATION**

A Thesis in

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by

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ABSTRACT

The imprisonment rate in America has been steadily increasing. As the number of individuals in prison grows, so does the need to study this population. Little research has been conducted concerning the experiences of those with natural life sentences. This dissertation focuses on this population and its representatives' experiences related to social support and the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association.

Previous research suggests that social support groups can be beneficial to members' psychological, behavioral, physical, and relational well-being. Building from this research, the author interviewed members of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association, an activist and social support group, to investigate how members talk about their experiences. Observations of group meetings revealed how social support was communicated by group members. Furthermore, survey research was conducted in an effort to explore whether the conceptual structure of social support, as reported by those with natural life sentences, was similar to that in previous related research.

The data suggested that Yalom's theoretical model of social support is incomplete when applied to the experiences of SCI-Huntingdon's board members of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association. This theoretical model is more comprehensive with the addition of the concept of reassurance of worth. This concept seems to be particularly salient to a group often labeled and stereotyped negatively by society.

Findings from the interviews were consistent with other research in the Communication and Sociology disciplines. The participants tended to focus on 11 domains when discussing their experiences. The domains included decision to become a

member, goals, control, solidarity, identity, intergroup bias, responsibility, member relations, group satisfaction, costs and benefits, and future.

The data did not support the factor structure Cutrona and Russell's (1987) Social Provisions Scale revealed, that is, the six dimensions of social support as described by Weiss. Instead, the data appeared to capture uni-dimensional constructs that were amendable to the label of social support. This suggested that current knowledge regarding the experiences of social support may not be generalizable to the prison context and that scholars may have an incomplete understanding of the natural life-sentenced population.

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Chapter 1

Introduction and Review of Previous Literature

Introduction

The term *crime* does not have a simple definition. In fact, each society defines actions considered to be criminal differently. *Crime* and *criminal*, or one who commits a crime, are, therefore, socially constructed. Taking the life of another individual, however, is universally considered to be a criminal action (Fabrega, 2004). The individuals who commit this act are ostracized in every culture throughout the world. However, the treatment of guilty individuals varies greatly from one location to another. For example, Trinidad and Tobago command all murderers to be put to death, regardless of the circumstances of the crime (Trinidad and Tobago, 2005). In contrast, England does not have capital punishment, and the average prison sentence for murder in England is only 230 months (Crime and Justice, 1998). Furthermore, the punishment for homicide has changed throughout history. For example, the prison sentence for homicide in England increased 75 months, or nearly 50%, between 1981 and 1995 (Crime and Justice, 1998).

The punishment for murder is reflective of the social construction of the crime. In societies in which murder is viewed as particularly heinous, the punishment is likely to be more severe. Sentencing guidelines in the United States are no different. The criminal justice system has transformed through time as theory and public opinion of crime and criminals has evolved. For example, the country experienced a moratorium in the death penalty between 1967 and 1977 as a result of public opinion opposing capital

punishment. More recently, *Roper v. Simmons* (2005) declared the death penalty cruel and unusual for those convicted of homicide under the age of 18. This decision parallels public opinion regarding the execution of juveniles (“Recent Public Opinion,” 2005).

In recent years, there has been an outpouring of support from both prisoner and victims’ rights activists and organizations. In Pennsylvania, these groups press for different treatment of those convicted of murder. Throw Away the Key, Justice for All, and Survivors of Homicide are victims’ rights groups who contend most individuals guilty of homicide should not be given a second chance. Conversely, groups such as Greaterfriends, Pennsylvania CURE, the Lobbyist Coalition, and Pennsylvania Prison Society fight for the rights of all inmates. These groups believe that some individuals who have been convicted of murder should be eligible for parole. They have brought awareness to the struggle concerning life-sentenced inmates in Pennsylvania.

Consequently, a joint state government commission was recently assigned to research this matter, as well as current information on geriatric and seriously ill inmates.

As the awareness of this issue grows throughout Pennsylvania, there has been one group intimately familiar with the details: life-sentenced inmates. For these individuals, this issue is not merely about economics or politics. Instead, it is about their future. The Pennsylvania Lifers’ Association is an inmate-run group that seeks to change legislation concerning parole eligibility for life-sentenced inmates. These members work together to raise funds, write to politicians, and increase political involvement of their family and friends. The group members have worked together for over 30 years with the same goal, but have not succeeded. The group has expanded its activities to include providing support for one another, support for the community, and fundraising for nonprofit

organizations (Paluch, 2004). The group has experienced a great deal of loyalty and dedication from its members.

Little is known about the life-sentenced population or about how the members of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association works together. These individuals are united in their personal circumstances and desire for freedom, but there seems to have been little progress made in changing the sentencing regulations. Victims' rights groups, as well as the media portrayal of offenders, have added to the negative perception of offenders (Barnett, 2003), and created a generally negative view of inmates. Furthermore, as incarceration lengths increase, many relationships with those outside of prison deteriorate. This leaves prisoners with fewer support outlets. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association functions to provide social support to its members. The nature of social support in this unique population has not been investigated, and, therefore, our knowledge of social support for lifers is at best based on anecdotes.

It is not the author's purpose to make claims regarding the parole eligibility of these individuals, but to describe how members of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association communicate social support during group meetings. In addition, it was to explore how members of the SCI-Huntingdon chapter of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association describe their experiences with the group. Furthermore, the dissertation was designed to determine whether our current knowledge of social support based on data from a non-prison population is generalizable to this unique, but growing population.

Review of Previous Literature

The United States of America has the highest imprisonment rate of any industrialized nation (Tonry, 2004). Researchers link this condition to current trends in penal policies, such as mandatory minimum sentencing, three strikes policies, increased sentences for nonviolent crimes, and zero tolerance policies (e.g., Austin & Irwin, 2001; Tonry, 2004). Nearly 1 of every 15 Americans will spend time in prison during his or her lifetime (“Criminal offenders statistics,” 2001). Interestingly, however, most research concerning the penal system overlooks the experiences of those in prison. The following literature review provides information on the modern trends in the American penal system, current research concerning social support and self-help groups, norms and regulations involving the lifer population, and details of the Pennsylvania Lifers’ Association. Social support group research within social sciences has emphasized both positive and negative effects on participants (e.g., Greenstein & Breitbart, 2000; Smokowski, Rose, & Bacallao, 2001), even though little of this research has concentrated on the prison population.

With the United States imprisonment rate increasing approximately 3.5% annually (Prison statistics, 2005), the need to explore the experiences of inmates is becoming more critical. Current theories and knowledge regarding social support groups may not be applicable in the prison context because of various perceptions surrounding the prison context, as well as offenders’ characteristics, such as those have been recognized as increasing the propensity of criminal behavior. This will be explored

through investigation of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association, a social support group for inmates with life sentences.

The Current State of Prisons

There are currently more than 2 million inmates in United States federal and state prisons (Ehrmann, 2002; Erger & Beger, 2002; Fazel, McMillan, & O'Donell, 2002; Rapposelli, Kennedy, Miles, & Tinsley, 2002). According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, another 4 million individuals are either on parole or probation ("Criminal offenders statistics," 2001). At the end of 2002, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections housed over 40,000 inmates, with 3,859 individuals serving life sentences (Hartman, 2003). Pennsylvania's life sentences are natural-life sentences, and offenders sentenced to life are eligible for release only if the conviction is reversed or they receive a commutation from the governor. Such commutations are extremely rare. In fact, there has been only one life-sentenced inmate commuted in the last 11 years (G. Jones, personal communication, May 10, 2005). Those convicted of murder in the first-degree may receive either life or death sentences, and those convicted of murder in the second-degree receive life sentences.

It is commonly accepted in criminology that incarceration for crime is justified because of its primary intentions of deterrence, rehabilitation, incapacitation, and retribution (e.g., Dunbar & Langdon, cited in Jewkes & Letherby, 2002; Lauen, 1988). Rehabilitation and incapacitation are both referred to in the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections' mission statement, which reads:

The mission of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections is to protect the public by confining persons committed to our custody in safe, secure facilities, and to provide opportunities for inmates to acquire the skills and values necessary to become productive law-abiding citizens; while respecting the rights of crime victims. (Beard, 2003, p. 1)

In addition, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections refers to state facilities as “correctional institutions” rather than “penitentiaries.” This label further implies rehabilitation rather than retribution. However, those with life sentences will never have the opportunity to use rehabilitation-oriented skills and values outside prison walls.

Pennsylvania, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Louisiana, and South Dakota are the only states that deny parole for all inmates serving life sentences. The denial of parole for these offenders contradicts the Department of Corrections’ rehabilitation principle (Life sentences, 2004). In addition, it creates a distinct group of inmates with different characteristics and experiences from those who have the opportunity for release.

Incarceration can actually be criminogenic, or likely to increase the propensity of criminal behavior, because of the social bonds created in prison, negative labels placed on inmates, criminal techniques learned, and an offender identity that develops throughout one’s experience in the criminal justice system (Buchanan & Hartley, 1992; Cullen & Agnew, 1999; Gallie, 2000; Piquero & Mazerolle, 2001). Empirical studies (e.g., *Recidivism Report*, 2001) have also shown positive associations between prison sentences and recidivism rates, which suggests incarceration could actually hinder one’s ability to readjust to societal norms and expectations. This hindering of one’s ability to adjust is the focus of the “prisonization” hypothesis (Wheeler, 1978). Inmates with life

sentences, or “lifers,” could be more susceptible to the negative effects of prisonization because of the extensive length of their sentences, as well as the tendency to establish the prison as a home rather than temporary housing. Although inmates often fight change, as the length of incarceration increases, so does conformity to prison’s social norms, which are often very different from those in free society (Atchley & McCabe, 1968).

To rehabilitate offenders and combat the criminogenic effects that incarceration may foster, many prisons have implemented programs focused on increasing inmates’ education levels, technical skills, and communication skills. The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections has adopted a wide array of programs to promote rehabilitation, including drug and alcohol addiction treatment, religious programs, community corrections, education and work programs, and mental and physical health programs.

The effectiveness of such programs is typically reflected in the recidivism rates of those who participate and those who do not (e.g., Duguid & Pawson, 1998; Jablecki, 2000; Penny, 2000). For example, programs implemented that focus on education have lowered recidivism rates. The national average recidivism rate has been reported as 40% to 50% (Duguid & Pawson, 1998; Jablecki, 2000) and 40% to 55% (Penny 2000). Studies following released offenders who have participated in educational programs during their incarceration have found recidivism rates to be significantly lower and report them as 25% overall (Duguid & Pawson, 1998), 11% for those who earn bachelor’s degrees while imprisoned, and 5% for those who earn master’s degrees (Jablecki, 2000). Furthermore, vocational training and educational programs, which focus on the attainment of a college degree or a GED, equip the offender with skills that increase the possibility of acquiring a

job upon release, another factor in lowering recidivism rates (Duguid & Pawson, 1998; Sung, 2001). However, those with life sentences in Pennsylvania will not be released, and are, therefore, not included in these findings. There is little empirical evidence regarding the costs and benefits of prison programs for those with life sentences.

Many of the rehabilitation programs implemented by the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections serve to increase interaction among prisoners; however, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections has recently disbanded many inmate-run groups. Included among those terminated are several chapters of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association. Prison administrators are attempting to decrease the number of these groups to one per state correctional institution. No justifications have been provided as to why this change is being made. However, insight into the reasoning behind this decision can be gained from existing literature.

The primary concern of prison administration and staff is security (Erger & Beger, 2002; Freshwater, Walsh, & Storey, 2002; Gallie, 2000; King, 1997; Lin, 2000; Shrubsole & Christ, 2002; Vanyur & Strada, 2002). Prison riots or escapes are a constant threat to the institution and prison staff. Programs disrupt daily schedules and require additional security personnel for surveillance, as well as introduce possible security breaches by allowing non-prison personnel and inmate visitors to enter the premises (Gallie, 2000; Vanyur & Strada, 2002). Prison employees frequently protest the implementation of prison programs out of fear related to security and negative feelings toward inmates (Lin, 2000). In addition, programs often require equipment considered contraband by institution regulations. Programs must either go without desired

equipment, which decreases their effectiveness, or potentially create further security violations.

Overpopulation in prisons can amplify such risks. The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections' facilities report population as 8.6% over capacity (*Monthly Population Report*, 2005). This condition means that inmates have less personal space and possibly experience increased frustration and aggressive tendencies in an environment already laden with stress (Gallie, 2000). Prison staff must provide services to a greater number of inmates than the facility has been designed to accommodate. In addition, prison staff often feel resentment toward inmates who receive medical and educational benefits that are not available free to prison staff and the general public. Inmates may be viewed as undeserving and ungrateful (Gallie, 2000; Lin, 2000).

Several inmates have protested the Department of Corrections' decision to allow only one inmate-run group to address the various needs of the entire prison population (e.g., Robinson, 2004). In addition, there is uncertainty among inmates as to why this change has been made and whether it is uniform throughout all Pennsylvania Department of Corrections facilities (Robinson, 2004). In fact, this change has not yet been implemented in all Pennsylvania state corrections facilities. Some groups with strong attendance have been grandfathered and may continue to meet, although their future is uncertain. All state correctional facilities under construction will allow only one inmate-run group upon opening.

One group that has been allowed to continue in select prisons is the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association. This inmate-run group focuses its efforts on influencing the legislation concerning parole eligibility for life-sentenced inmates. Further details of this

organization will be discussed later. As of March, 2004, there were five Pennsylvania State Correctional Institutions that permitted the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association to assemble: Rockview, Graterford, Dallas, Huntingdon, and Pittsburgh (W. DiMascio, personal communication, March 29, 2004). The Pennsylvania Lifers' Association is not permitted in any female prisons. In January of 2005, the Pennsylvania Department closed SCI-Pittsburgh. Most inmates from this facility were moved to SCI-Fayette, a newly built institution that follows the new group regulations. With the completion of this transfer, the Pittsburgh chapter of the Lifers' Association was disbanded, leaving only four chapters remaining.

Effects of Incarceration

As discussed above, the rules and regulations adopted by prison administration serve to fulfill five functions: security, incapacitation, retribution, rehabilitation, and deterrence. These policies have many significant implications for those housed within the penitentiary. Prison entails not only the loss of physical freedom, but also presents challenges to one's identity, physical health, beliefs, emotional well-being, and social relationships. Early accounts of prison life acknowledged the goal of penitentiaries to remove the individuality of inmates and to construct a prison identity (Clemmer, 1940; Goffman, 1961). Upon entering prison, each inmate is stripped of his or her personal items and given a prison uniform. Offenders are categorized and assigned permanent inmate numbers that will be used for identification for the remainder of their sentences. The prison system labels criminals when classifying them. These classifications place the

inmate in a group, which further suppresses his or her individuality (Huspek & Comerford, 1996). The categories reflect certain stereotypes and social expectations, and individuality is largely lost (Clemmer, 1940; Goffman 1961). Just as one in regular society who behaves abnormally as a result of a particular title (Kaplan & Lin, 2000), prisoners often begin to act according to expectations suggested by their particular labels (Goffman, 1963; Huspek & Comerford, 1996).

These labels usually come with negative connotations, and, therefore, communicate that the person bearing the label should act in a negative manner. For example, an individual categorized as a “drug offender” may internalize this label. It may be true that this individual did break the law and sell narcotics; however, this individual would have participated in many activities unrelated to this crime.

When a person is given a negative label, it often is accompanied by a host of negative stereotypes. A drug offender may be viewed as out of control, greedy, manipulative, as well as many other negative stereotypes. Although an individual may not possess all, or even most, of these qualities, it is possible that he or she will conform more to these stereotypes if he or she internalizes the label. In addition, because the individual has recently been removed from typical daily activities and relationships, it may be more difficult for one to identify with any positive labels he or she may have had prior to incarceration, which makes the individual more susceptible to the effects of negative labels. If an individual is labeled “deviant” by society, he or she can never be “normal” (Corey, 1996). In addition, correctional officers often categorize inmates in a manner described as derogatory and demeaning (Goffman, 1961). Riley (2000) indicates that this is done to make sense of prisoners and maintain the structure of authority in

prisons. Although this may be done in an effort to maintain security, it could have negative effects on the prison population.

Schmid and Jones (1991) note that when one enters prison, he or she must postpone his or her pre-prison identity and adopt a prison identity in order to adapt to the new environment, which new offenders usually perceive as threatening. They also posit that an inmate strives to maintain a part of his or her pre-prison identity throughout the sentence and has full intentions of resuming his or her pre-prison identity upon release. This assumes that a prisoner will be released. For those with natural-life sentences, there is little hope of commutation and virtually no expectation of release. Therefore, it seems reasonable to infer that identity negotiation for those with natural-life sentences varies from identity negotiation for those with shorter sentences.

In addition to the variation in identity individuals experience during incarceration, matters of physical health are a primary concern of inmates. According to a Bureau of Justice study, 23% of male inmates and 30% of female inmates have reported medical problems (Cooper, 2002). Prisoners are estimated to be 8 times more at risk for infectious diseases than those in free society (Modernization, 2002). Prisoners in American public penitentiaries have a 5 times greater rate of AIDS infection than the general public (Braithwaite, Hammett, & Jacob-Arriola, 2002; Rapposelli et al., 2002; Strickland, 2002) and are 14 times more likely to have HIV (Ehrmann, 2002). Tuberculosis rates of prisoners are estimated between 4 and 17 times greater than the general public (Strickland, 2002). In Pennsylvania State Correctional facilities, over 8,000 inmates are inflicted with Hepatitis C (Love, 2003). Some also question whether treatment received in prison is satisfactory (Carceral, 2004; Paluch, 2004).

Although most illnesses are contracted before entering prison, activities taking place within the penitentiary also put inmates at high risk for disease transmission. Often, they are lacking proper personal hygiene (Methicillin-resistant, 2000; Paluch, 2004; Stoever, 2002). In addition, overpopulation and the close quarters in which prisoners live increase their risk (Gallie, 2000; Stoever, 2002). Some inmates harm themselves intentionally (Paluch, 2004; Stoever, 2002), and others continue to use drugs when contraband is introduced into prisons (Braithwaite et al., 2002; Gallie, 2000; Stoever, 2002; Strickland, 2002). Incarceration increases the risk of sexual assault, infection, and posttraumatic stress disorder (Freudenberg, 2002). The underutilization of harm-reduction techniques, such as education, condom distribution, and needle exchange programs, is also reportedly at the base of the high incidence of disease (Braithwaite et al., 2002; Ehrmann, 2002; Hassine, 2004). Although many inmates adopt proactive measures to decrease the transmission of disease, it appears as though lifers have a particularly deep concern for their health (Carceral, 2000; Hassine, 2004; Paluch, 2004). Further understanding of lifers' experiences could provide insight into this inclination.

Many prisons encourage religious programs and participation by inmates because they purportedly influence positive behavior within the prison walls. Each Pennsylvania State Correctional Facility has a spiritual area housing religious materials for various faiths. Regular services are held by contracted chaplains, and inmates may have a spiritual advisor on their visitation lists. Prison regulations make some exceptions to accommodate aspects of various religions. For example, rules regarding hair length or limitations on jewelry and other artifacts may conflict with religious beliefs. Prison

officials make attempts to respect these beliefs and exempt followers when it does not threaten security (Beard, 2003).

Religion's effect on the probability of one's committing crimes has been debated (Evans, Cullen, Dunaway, & Burton, 1995). Demographic studies have revealed that crime rates are generally lower in areas of higher religious density (Evans et al., 1995). Bainbridge (1989) conducted a study showing that church membership rates were inversely correlated with rates of crime and cultism. Research involving youth crime has shown that increased church participation is associated with decreased crime rates (Johnson, Larson, Li, & Jang, 2000). However, religion has also been identified as a source of motivation for crime, specifically in hate crimes (e.g., Recent, 1999). Because these findings are less frequent, it is commonly believed that religion has a more positive effect on reducing crime.

Each bit of identity negotiation, social capital, social influence, remorse, and reactance affects prisoners' decisions to practice certain religions. Some researchers believe that prisoners join religious groups as a conscious decision to help in the formation of a positive identity. For example, the Muslim religion is generally respected in prisons because of the roles many Muslims have played in increasing prisoners' rights (Smith, 1993). Aims of Islam include the elimination of socio-economic inequalities and political oppression (Ali, 2000), both salient to prisoners. Therefore, prisoners may anticipate an increase in social capital by joining Islam and associating with other Muslims. In addition, one can make his affiliation known to other inmates through the style in which the person wears his or her prison uniform, the way one styles his or her hair, by displaying religious artifacts, as well as through the people with whom an inmate

allows himself or herself to be seen. These are all dynamics of a prisoner's identity (Ramsey, 1976).

As mentioned previously, many prisoners are fearful of other inmates. Building social capital via religious affiliation could help a prisoner feel more secure in his or her environment. Stark and Finke (2000) suggest that one will rationally attempt to increase social capital. This can be accomplished through participation in a religion. Social networks can also be influential in determining religious participation (Stark & Finke, 2000). When one develops a strong attachment to another who is committed to a religion, he or she is more likely to participate in activities of that religion.

Remorse may be a motive for inmates to practice a religion. Torok (1999) asserts that religion functions as a means for prisoners to increase perceptions of self-control and self-worth. Often, inmates are surrounded by only messages of failure and shame for their behavior. Religion can offer forgiveness, as well as a new start. This may be particularly important to lifers because of the severe nature of the crime for which they were convicted.

Resenting many of the regulations placed on them, prisoners often behave in a manner that demonstrates opposition to authority and breaks or challenges prison rules. Although there have been laws enacted in order to protect prisoners' rights regarding religion (Solove, 1996), these laws are secondary to the prison's primary objective of maintaining the safety and security of inmates and staff. Many prison regulations create obstacles to religious functions, such as group gatherings and limiting religious artifacts ("Society Behind Bars," 1993). Brehm's (1966) *psychological reactance theory* posits that when one perceives that his or her freedom is threatened, he or she has an enhanced

desire to exercise that freedom. Penitentiary rules and regulations are modified as security concerns and needs arise. Often, these result in a greater number of restrictions being placed on inmates. If these individuals perceive that their religious freedoms are threatened or may be removed, according to *psychological reactance theory*, they are likely to act in a manner which exercises their freedoms. When applied to inmates and religion, this theory can be useful in explaining why so many prisoners choose to participate in religious activities.

Although the majority of criminologists no longer believe that most crime is the result of biological or psychological factors, many inmates demonstrate signs of psychological illness. The Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates that 16% of all inmates in America's public prisons have some form of mental illness (Lunney & Brown, 2002; Shrubsole & Christ, 2002; Strickland, 2002), whereas only 5% of the general U.S. population has a mental illness (Mental Health, 2002). In Pennsylvania Correctional Institutions, 15.8% of inmates participate in mental illness treatment programs, and 3.8% have been diagnosed seriously mentally ill and require close monitoring (*Mental Health Services*, 2003).

Offenders entering prison experience unusually high stress levels, presumably in response to the loss of freedom, deterioration of personal relationships, ambiguity of incarceration, ignorance of prison norms, and feelings of hopelessness (Gallie, 2000; Pomeroy, Kiam, & Green, 2000; Schmid & Jones, 1991). Prison violence has decreased dramatically in the last 40 years; however, it remains a threat to inmates (Hassine, 2004). In addition, many prisoners have histories of emotional distress and abuse (Pomeroy et

al., 2000). Each of these factors has been correlated with trauma, depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, and aggressive behavior (Pomeroy et al., 2000).

Prison Relationships

As discussed, inmates experience a variety of challenges as a result of imprisonment. Perhaps one of the most difficult adjustments for an inmate is the change in personal relationships due to incarceration. These changes in relationships prove arduous for both the inmate as well as his or her family and friends. The amount and quality of communication between inmates and those outside prison is limited by prison regulations. Because prison officials know that visitations are important to inmates, these can be further restricted as a form of punishment (Proctor & Pease, 2000). Additional obstacles, such as transportation, telephone costs, and personal schedules, further decrease the volume of communication. Many inmates have responsibilities to those outside prison with whom they must maintain contact. Among these responsibilities are nearly 1.5 million American children (Adalist-Estrin, 1995; "Incarcerated Parents," 1997) and inmates' spouses (Gordon & McConnell, 1999; Worthington et al., 2000). Although the parent is physically removed from the child, the influence and role of parent does not stop (Adalist-Estrin, 1995; Carlson & Cervera, 1991; Gilbertson, Dindia, & Allen, 1998; Gordon & McConnell, 1999). Children of offenders have an 8 times greater chance of becoming offenders than do children of non-offenders. The figure is lower for those who have frequent visitations with the parent in prison (Cranford & Williams, 1998). Furthermore, family members of inmates have reported declining health during a loved

one's incarceration, economic problems, increased emotional stress, strains on parenting obligations, and social isolation (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003; Carlson & Cervera, 1991). Inmates are often aware of the disorganization occurring in their families' lives and feel a sense of responsibility and guilt (Paluch, 2004). Family and friends may choose to sever ties with offenders because of anger and shame related to the crime and stigma associated with those who affiliate with prisoners. Therefore, social support from those within prison may become increasingly important to one's emotional well-being because of a loss or the changing nature of social support from those on the outside. Support groups are often formed within penitentiaries in an effort to help inmates cope with this change or loss, as well as to improve communication and life skills (e.g., Dixon, 2000; Morgan, Ferrell, & Winterowd, 1999). To make clear how social support groups function in the prison context, the following section briefly details the social support literature within the Communication and Sociology disciplines. This is followed by an extension of these concepts to the penitentiary context.

Support Groups

An extensive amount of research concerning support groups has been conducted in the social sciences (e.g., Elbirlik, Apprey, & Moles, 1994; Ferencik, 1990; Kurtz, 1992; Schiff & Bargal, 2000). During the past three decades, self-help and support groups have seen a dramatic increase (Cline, 1999). According to Cline, this is due, in part, to a decline in traditional support structures, changes in needs of health care, increased

acceptance of alternative sources, and diversity of needs. Katz and Bender define support groups as:

Voluntary, small group structures for mutual aid and the accomplishment of a special purpose. They are usually formed by peers who have come together for mutual assistance in satisfying a common need, overcoming a common handicap or life-disrupting problem or bringing about social and/or personal change. (cited by Cline, 1999, p. 519)

Support groups have been used to improve individuals' psychological, behavioral, physical, and relational well-being.

A review of research examining the effects of group therapy on depressive disorders revealed that support groups are effective in the short-term in decreasing symptoms of depression (Vandervoort & Fuhriman, 1991). The authors concluded that following successful group therapy, one could expect lasting effects. A meta-analysis of research concerning depression group psychotherapy indicated that group therapy was effective in the treatment of depression for 85% of patients (McDurmet, Miller, & Brown, 2001). Therapeutic factors, including the instillation of hope, universality, familial recapitulation, cohesiveness, imparting information, and catharsis, appear to increase in support groups over time (MacNair-Semands & Lese, 2000). Group therapy resulted in a decrease of the symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder for women with multiple traumatic experiences (Lubin, Loris, Burt, & Johnson, 1998). Cancer patients participating in meaning-centered psychotherapy reported feelings of being uplifted, camaraderie, positive coping, and believed that they helped other group members (Greenstein, 2000; Greenstein & Breitbart, 2000).

In addition to psychological benefits, participants in group therapy often undergo behavioral changes. For example, parents of children with cancer who attend support group gatherings have reported increased levels of activism as a result of group participation (Chesney & Chesler, 1993). Social support groups are common for those battling drug and alcohol addiction, and many studies have been conducted in an effort to identify what factors affect desistence of drug and alcohol usage (e.g., Kurtz, 1990; McKay, Alterman, McLellan, & Snider, 1994). The structure of these groups varies from ones with rigid formats, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, to being fairly unstructured, such as Al-Anon. Rugal (1991) noted that positive regard, identification with other members, self-disclosure, group acceptance, level of concern of other members, and the degree to which a group is task-oriented affect denial tendencies, a key component in many addiction recovery programs.

Behavioral changes often have physical benefits for members of support groups. For example, cirrhosis death rates have decreased with an increase in Alcoholics Anonymous membership (Humphreys & Ribisl, 1999). Social support groups have also been used to help individuals cope with physical illness, and some evidence shows that members of these groups have experienced improved health. Among other things, increased positive coping behavior and self-esteem were reported by cancer patients in China (Mok, 2001). In addition, patients with chronic aphasia who participated in group therapy rated higher on linguistic and communicative measures than those who received no treatment (Elman & Bernstein-Ellis, 1999).

Relational benefits can accrue from participation in support groups (Ferencik, 1990; Goldsmith, 2004; Mok, 2001; Schindler, 1999). Evidence of this includes a study

of cancer patients who participated in self-help groups and reported that interpersonal relationships improved after joining the group (Mok, 2001). Participants with psychiatric disabilities were found to have increases in social interaction skills (Schindler, 1999). Ferencik (1990) claims that support groups' primary benefit, compared to individual therapy, is the members' learning of interpersonal problem-solving skills. Specifically, members learn to utilize remedial interchanges, which allows for confrontations without harming interpersonal relationships.

Although research has not identified spirituality as a benefit of support groups, it is often an important component in support groups (e.g., Ronel & Libman, 2003; Uva, 1991). For example, Alcoholics Anonymous recognizes an ultimate authority under whom group leaders are said to serve. Many religious institutions organize support groups for their members, in which the primary focus is something other than spiritual. Although individuals may join these groups for other reasons, it is reasonable to speculate that increased spirituality would result. Spiritually oriented group therapy has reportedly improved interpersonal bonding, affect, mood, self-esteem, and motivation in severely mentally ill women (Sageman, 2004). In addition, research suggests that spirituality is critical to one's psychological health (e.g., McClain, Rosenfeld, & Breitbart, 2003).

Most scholarly literature concerning support groups focus on positive individual or group outcomes. However, several studies have shown that support groups may have either no lasting positive outcomes or damaging effects. Eighty-one percent of cocaine abusers taking part in either weekly family or group therapy sessions, for instance, reported cocaine usage when interviewed 6-12 months later. There was no correlation between the number of therapy sessions and improvement for those who did abstain

(Kang et al., 1991). Smokowski et al. (2001) examined possible causes for extended psychological distress directly resulting from one's group experience. They identified member attributes (such as instability and inability to follow group norms), group processes (such as a lack of structure or demanding conformity), and negative leadership (such as irresponsibility or inability to recognize member problems).

Burleson, Albrecht, Goldsmith, and Sarason (1994) and Goldsmith (2004) claim that a communication conceptualization is most useful in understanding social support. There is little consensus as to the means by which social support is communicated from one individual to another; however, Burleson, Albrecht, Goldsmith, and Sarason (1994) suggest social support is conveyed through interaction (verbal or nonverbal), an inherently communicative act, and therefore, should be explored within communication. Other scholars agree that social support is derived from conversation, a more specific communicative activity (Goldsmith, 2004). Goldsmith argues that studies regarding emotion, cognition, physiology, and motivation, while closely related to communication, "do not shed light on the communicative processes which distinguish *conversation* from thoughts about conversation, motives for engaging in conversation, emotional responses to conversation, or bodily effects of conversation" (p. 31). A communication perspective in social support encourages examination of these areas that are not explored in interdisciplinary research.

Burleson and MacGeorge (2002) note that a communication perspective in social support varies from an interdisciplinary perspective in the centrality of the communication role, assumption of a link between communication and well-being, focus on the intention of social support acts, normative focus, and emphasis on interaction and

outcomes. For example, matching models have been developed by communication scholars. These models suggest that particular stressors are aided by matching social support types (Burlison & MacGeorge, 2002). Lakey and Cohen explain this idea as follows:

The hypothesis is that social support will be effective in promoting coping and reducing the effects of a stressor, insofar as the form of assistance matches the demands of the stressor. According to this view, each stressful circumstance places specific demands on the affected individual. (cited by Burlison & MacGeorge, 2002, p. 387)

Because messages may have a variety of meanings, it has been difficult for scholars to create classifications of stressors and matching social support acts. Furthermore, this model has been criticized as overly simplistic in ignoring various aspects of message transmission and stress inducers.

Another communication model that has been suggested is a stress-buffering model. The buffering effect of enacted social support suggests that individuals may experience reductions of the negative effects of stress on individual well-being as a result of social support (Goldsmith, 2004). In this model, social support is enacted through conversation. The conversational participants then evaluate the social support. The speaker and listener often evaluate the level of social support differently. These evaluations affect the experience of coping. Those who experience a decrease in stress as a result of social support are likely to have increased physical and psychological well-being. This model encompasses a variety of factors, including participants' personalities, emotional states, relationships, and judgments. Although the work is promising in regard

to the health benefits of social support, the findings to date are inconclusive (Goldsmith, 2004).

Kurtz (1994) observes that little research has been conducted investigating the processes of self-help and social support groups, and Cawyer and Smith-Dupre (1995) have noted, “research has not explained the specific purposes of supportive interactions for individuals participating in social support groups and has not identified the primary messages used to carry out the support group process” (p. 245). This suggests that there are extensive gaps in the literature detailing how social support is communicated within social support groups.

Some scholars have identified behaviors typical of communicative support. Conveying information appears to be beneficial to both the speaker and receiver in social support groups (Cutrona & Suhr, 1994; Kurtz, 1997; Vaux, 1988; Yalom, 1995). Conveying information includes giving advice, sharing knowledge, sharing personal stories, supportive help-giving comments, direct guidance, and suggestions (Goldsmith, 2004; Kurtz, 1997; Yalom, 1995). By providing information, individuals serve an altruistic function. This also ostensibly aids in one’s perception of and reaction to social support (Yalom, 1995). Those who receive information from others gain knowledge related to their current situations and may develop meaning and be better equipped to cope with difficulties (Kurtz, 1994).

Individuals receiving support frequently receive financial or other material goods and practical assistance (Vaux, 1988). No research could be found that documents these activities in social support groups. However, it is likely that some social support groups provide members with practical, financial, or material aid. Frequently, participants in

support groups have financial concerns (e.g., Cawyer & Smith-Dupre, 1995; Roberts, Piper, Denny, & Cuddeback, 1997). Information from other group members can have indirect financial benefits because it may enable one to locate alternative financial support outlets (e.g., Roberts et al., 1997).

Support beneficial to group members includes emotional behavior (Vaux, 1988). Yalom (1995) identified cathartic behavior as helpful to group members, but only after strong cohesiveness has developed in groups. Gottlieb (1988) suggests that expressing emotions, particularly negative emotions, during group meetings can improve one's psychological well-being.

Conveying a sense of belonging correlates with perceptions of social support (Kurtz, 1997). This manifests itself in the development of social networks and can lead to a sense of universality (Kurtz, 1997; Yalom, 1995). Individuals in social support groups gain the understanding that others have had similar experiences and reduce feelings of loneliness.

Individuals experience social support in a variety of ways. Some of the factors influencing social support processes in groups include participants' genders, ages, relationships, amount of contact, ideology, timing, mode of support, communicators' moods, climate, and structure (Egbert, 2003; Kurtz, 1997; Segrin, 2003; Vaux, 1988). These comprise a complex variety of individual and group-level factors. Furthermore, providers, recipients, and observers of the communication of social support often perceive the degree and value of communicated social support differently (Goldsmith, 2004). This suggests that discrepancies frequently exist between the perceptions of social support among each of these individuals. Because researchers often look at variables

form only one of these vantage points, the implications of some social support research is disputed.

The relationships in which one experiences social support have been explored in previous research (e.g., Gottlieb, 1988; Weiss, 1974; Wellman & Wortley, 1990). Most of an individual's social support comes from a small number of closely associated individuals (Wellman & Wortley, 1990). Receiving and providing social support appear to be directly related to relational satisfaction (Goldsmith, 2004). However, it can be difficult to fulfill the expectation of social support in close relationships for a variety of reasons, such as behaviors that can be viewed as both beneficial and harmful to social support (such as providing advice versus "butting in"), conflicting emotions, and the desire to solve one's problems rather than provide support (Burlison & Goldsmith, 1998; Goldsmith, 2004).

There is a plethora of empirical evidence relating to processes and outcomes of support group interaction; however, many studies have limited findings, and the applicability of the research to the prison context is unclear. For example, many of the studies only examined short-term effects. It is unknown whether the effects persist past six months. In addition, most groups studied have included only voluntary participants. Those who join groups voluntarily are more likely to be open to certain types of messages (Higgins, Trope, & Kwon, 1999). However, many inmates are assigned to support groups, rather than self-selected membership. For them, the benefits may not be as great. Furthermore, many studies have produced mixed findings (Goldsmith, 2004). Further investigation into the functions of social support groups within this context would be valuable in assessing the importance of support groups in penitentiaries in particular.

Groups in Prison

The prison environment varies greatly from free society. Experiences and attitudes of individuals in penitentiaries are often quite different from those of people who do not live each day within prison walls (Gallie, 2000; Wright, 2005). As mentioned previously, building relationships in prison can be difficult because of fear for personal safety and distrust of other inmates (Lambropoulou, 1999; Wright, 1993). In addition, there exists a “prisoners’ code” that dictates that an inmate should not become involved in another’s affairs unless he or she is directly affected. An inmate will not take part in activities that could lengthen either his or her sentence or that of another inmate. Although every penitentiary has varying characteristics, this code seems to be relatively uniform throughout the country (Clemmer, 1940; Goffman, 1961; Paluch, 2004; Slosar, 1978). An inmate’s reputation among other inmates is influenced by observed interactions with correctional officers (Walker, 2005). If a prisoner stands up to a guard or acts as though the guard is not an authority figure, the inmate becomes known for having a tough identity and can be respected for this confrontation (Huspek & Comerford, 1996). An inmate who serves as an informant to prison staff is a “snitch” and may be targeted for assaults (Paluch, 2004).

In addition to prison norms, several theories of criminology suggest characteristics common to offenders that could deter the seeking and beneficial effects of social support. For example, Hirschi’s (1969) *social bonds theory* would account for one’s participation in crime as a result of lack of control of informal and formal social controls. Hirschi included two primary propositions in this theory. First, there is an

inverse relationship between social bonds and delinquency. This suggests that social bonds aid in the prevention of delinquency. His second proposition suggests that social controls generally derive from bonds, such as attachment to others, commitment to conventional actions, action involvement, and beliefs.

If Hirschi's assertions are correct, this would suggest that one who behaves in a deviant manner likely would not have had social bonds strong enough to deter criminal behavior. Criminals tend either not to develop bonds with others or do not respond positively when they exist. Such individuals would not be influenced by social bonds within prison, which would limit their conformity to group norms.

Labeling theory suggests that one may participate in deviant acts because others have labeled him or her in a negative way (Becker, 1963). Tannenbaum (1963) stated, "the process of making the criminal, therefore, is a process of tagging, defining, identifying, segregating, describing, emphasizing, making conscious and self-conscious; it becomes a way of stimulating, suggesting, emphasizing, and evoking the vary traits that are complained of" (p. 20). Tannenbaum is suggesting that negative labels serve to induce the behavior those labels appear to capture.

Although many labeling theorists view "deviants" as similar to "normal" people, they acknowledge that after a label has been assigned and one's identity is adversely affected, behavior is likely to differ from that of a "normal" person (Matsueda, 1992). The behavior often reflects the stereotypes associated with assigned labels. Adding such labels as "convict," "prisoner," "offender," or "inmate" would likely increase one's propensity for deviance.

Lemert (1972) extended *labeling theory* by suggesting that deviance and labeling are intertwined. An individual must first behave in a manner that encourages others to label him or her in a negative way. The individual is then likely to participate in additional crimes, resulting in additional, and possibly more negative labeling by others. As this cycle continues, the person will begin to accept, or internalize, this label. This then leads to a self-perception that reflects the label.

Tannenbaum (1963) suggested that labeling individuals restricts their behavior in a manner that reflects the title given to them by society. This results in one's acting in a manner that further diverges from society's desired behavior. A deviant, by definition, is one who does not conform. Therefore, one who has this label and internalizes it is likely not to conform to the rules and regulations of a group. This theory further suggests that cooperation would likely not be present among such individuals.

Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) *general theory of crime* posits that one participates in crime out of a lack of self-control. Unlike many criminological theories, this theory concentrates on the role of the family during childhood. Specifically, it holds that the children of parents who do not monitor their children's behavior appropriately will develop low self-control. The theory suggests that the greater an individual's self-control, the less likely he or she will participate in deviant acts. The elements of low self-control, as explained by Gottfredson and Hirschi, include immediate gratification of desires, easy gratification of desires, little skill or planning, and excitement, risk, or thrill. A lack of self-control presumably is consistent across all contexts and throughout the lifespan. Therefore, an individual who participates in crime as a result of a lack of self-control is apt to retain this trait throughout incarceration. Because participation in groups

often requires time, effort, and skill, it is unlikely that a deviant who engages in criminal activities as a result of low self-control would be cooperative in a group setting.

Although no single theory has been accepted to explain why one commits crimes, each of those discussed here suggests that offenders possess characteristics or are in environments that may limit the value of social support in groups. These theories suggest that deviants tend to either not develop bonds with others, do not respond positively to social bonds, have little self-control, have internalized labels related to deviants and associated expectations, and are in environments that promote seclusion and are not conducive to cooperation.

In contrast to these theories, there has been empirical evidence and theoretical perspectives that suggest that inmates may be prone to working well together in groups. For example, some scholars have reported that prisoners freely choose to associate and often form strong bonds in social groups (Atchley & McCabe, 1968; Harper, 1952). Inmates may affiliate to increase protection from other inmates (Gagliardo, 2000; Wooldredge, 1999) or to provide emotional support and companionship (Gallie, 2000; Paluch, 2004). Many penitentiaries have even altered their prison designs to encourage physical contact among inmates, and recreational activities often require interaction and cooperation. This type of support has had positive effects, such as the reduction of stress, violence, and tension between prisoners and guards (Gallie, 2000).

Maslow (1999) posited that humans have a natural need for love and belonging. When these needs go unfulfilled, a person may experience loneliness, alienation, and rejection. Because personal relationships with those outside prison often deteriorate

during incarceration, prisoners may be likely to seek group membership as an alternative means of fulfilling this need.

Moos, Finney, and Maude-Griffin (1993) note that the concept of social climate, as described in Moos' (1974) *social ecology theory*, is essential to understanding many aspects of human behavior. Cline (1999) reports that research regarding support groups has repeatedly recognized the function of a supportive climate. She claims that previous research has identified supportive climates as typically involving communication that is "mutually understanding, supportive, and empathetic; accepting of divergent views; and genuine, open, and expressive" (p. 523). This type of climate would help individuals with unusual or socially stigmatized experiences to feel comfortable and express themselves openly. Deviants, by definition, are individuals who behave in a manner contrary to social norms. It may be difficult for those who engage in deviant behavior to find others with similar experiences. Consequently, the empathetic nature of support groups may be particularly attractive for inmates.

Brehm's (1966) *psychological reactance theory* is based upon the assumption that humans have a desire to make free choices. This theory examines the behavior of individuals when choices are limited or freedom is threatened. The theory posits that individuals are motivated to exercise a threatened freedom or attempt to reestablish a freedom which has been limited. In what Goffman (1961) refers to as "total institutions," individuals are restricted along numerous dimensions, including physical and chronological freedom. Most salient to social support and self-help groups are the restrictions placed on prison inmates' gathering and working together. Among these are prohibitions against working in cohorts to file grievances or petitions (Beard, 2003) and

structured physical positioning of inmates to limit communication (Paluch, 2004). On the basis of *psychological reactance theory*, it is likely that individuals would be motivated to exercise remaining freedoms related to collaboration and cooperation with other inmates. Specifically, inmates might choose to participate in social support groups in an effort to be able to work in conjunction with other individuals. Because inmates with life sentences have virtually no hope for parole or commutation, these individuals may be strongly motivated to join and participate in an organization or group in which the primary focus is to restore freedom by establishing the possibility of parole for life-sentenced inmates.

Psychotherapeutic groups have been organized in prisons that emphasize rehabilitation as a social goal rather than an individual objective. These groups encourage interaction among inmates through self-disclosure, interventions, and social support. Offenders who cooperate are often rewarded with more responsibility and better duties while in prison. These therapeutic communities appear to have a positive effect on both recidivism rates and in decreasing drug use among inmates (Wexler, De Leon, Thomas, Kressel, & Peters, 1999). Psychotherapeutic groups also reportedly benefit inmates through universality, interpersonal learning, and information sharing (Morgan et al., 1999). They provide opportunities for offenders to reflect on behaviors and attitudes and to discuss future conduct (Dixon, 2000). Inmates who voluntarily participate in group therapy are less likely to resist assistance and could benefit more than one who is assigned (Ronel, 2003). Identity associated with group membership, as well as an individual's identity, influences behavior among offenders (Useem & Kimball, 1987). A psychotherapeutic group's success depends on many factors, including staff perception of

inmates, inmate-staff relations, inmate characteristics, a facility's physical structure, and the treatment philosophy of the institution (Mamabolo, 1996).

The Pennsylvania Lifers' Association

Unlike psychotherapeutic groups, the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association is a support group in Pennsylvania correctional institutions not aided by therapists. The Pennsylvania Lifers' Association was established in 1971 to unite inmates in their efforts to change parole eligibility legislation. Inmates set the agenda and structure all meetings. The Pennsylvania Lifers' Association satisfies Katz and Bender's (in Cline, 1999) definition of self-help groups, in that membership is voluntary, there is a specific goal, participants seek to fulfill a common need, and the group acts to bring about social change. Since its founding, the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association has expanded its goals to include support for one another, as well as support for the community (Paluch, 2004). The group also works with external organizations, such as the Pennsylvania Prison Society, Fight for Lifers, Pennsylvania Lifers Support Group, and CentrePeace, to raise funds for nonprofit charities.

The group has multiple regular meetings. The observation portion of this study, as discussed in Chapter 2, focuses on weekly board meetings. These are typically attended by elected trustees and one representative of the Pennsylvania Prison Society. During these meetings, the chapter president moderates conversation. He is responsible for ensuring that all necessary topics are addressed in the minimal time frame provided. The board members are scheduled to meet for one hour each week. This hour includes travel

time between locations in the prison. As a result, participants are often late, and several must leave early. Meetings typically last for approximately 40 minutes. Meetings are divided into two sections, the business portion and general discussion. The business portion is generally formal and involves the participation of all group members. General discussion follows the business portion and typically entails several simultaneous conversations among dyads and triads.

In addition to the board meetings, the group has legislative meetings, member meetings, an annual picnic, and special gatherings. The legislative and member meetings are requested monthly, although they are often denied. All members are strongly encouraged to attend, but meetings are open to the entire prison population. There are 158 members of the SCI-chapter of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association, but fewer than 50 typically attend these meetings. Group members and their families are invited to attend the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association annual picnic. Attendance at the picnic is generally about twice that at regular monthly meetings. Special gatherings are held when the group invites outside speakers to address the group. These gatherings are organized in an effort to disseminate information to the group about current legislation and trends related to the life-sentenced population.

The Pennsylvania Lifers' Association has focused primarily on its initial task of lobbying the state legislature to change the laws concerning parole for life-sentenced inmates. However, Pennsylvania has not changed its legislation banning parole eligibility for those with life sentences, which serves as a continual source of negative feedback to the support group. Repeated failed attempts to achieve the group's goal could lead to frustration, anger, and helplessness, and seemingly discourage future participation.

Despite such possibilities, the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association has been characterized as having loyal participation, dedication, and strong cohesion.

Rewards have been identified as an effective means of maintaining member involvement in groups (Kurtz 1997). This group has not received rewards related to its primary goal. Therefore, it may be possible that members receive benefits from group participation unrelated to the primary goal. However, there exists an incomplete understanding of the group processes and member benefits. Further research into group member interaction and benefit appraisal may provide insight into why members place such high value on the existence of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association when it seems to be so far from achieving its major goal.

Rationale and Research

Incarceration rates in the United States have been increasing approximately 3.5% annually (Prison statistics, 2005). The United States currently has the highest rate of incarceration of any industrialized nation (Tonry, 2004). Over 2 million individuals are housed within state and federal penitentiaries (Ehrmann, 2002; Erger & Beger, 2002; Fazel et al., 2002; Rapposelli et al., 2002), and each of these individuals has a number of friends and family members who share the burden of incarceration.

Pennsylvania is one of only six states that does not have parole eligibility for life-sentenced inmates. Those who receive a life-sentence have very little hope of release. These individuals are only released if they receive a commutation or have their

convictions reversed. Recent changes in Pennsylvania legislation make both more difficult to occur.

In response to the needs of this population, as well as in an effort to change legislation regarding life-sentenced individuals, inmates formed the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association in 1971. This group has not been able to achieve its primary goal, yet it has been characterized as having loyal participation, dedication, and high cohesion. This dissertation is the product of an investigation of the benefits of membership in the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association, as reported by its members and the communication of social support during group meetings.

Communicating Social Support

Yalom (1995) suggests there are 11 primary factors that constitute the therapeutic experience: instillation of hope, universality, imparting information, altruism, the corrective recapitulation of the primary family group, imitative behavior, development of socializing techniques, interpersonal learning, group cohesiveness, catharsis, and existential factors. The salience of each factor depends on the needs of the group as and its members (e.g., Goodman & Jacobs, 1994; Moos et al., 1993). Individuals who experience instillation of hope believe their situations can improve through participation in support groups. Often, individuals in stressful situations perceive their experiences as singularly unique. Universality is experienced when one realizes this is not the case. Imparting information occurs when individuals convey and receive valuable knowledge

from the group. When an individual is able to help others through selfless acts, the experience encompasses altruism.

Yalom (1995) acknowledged in his research that many individuals who sought therapy came from dysfunctional families. These individuals frequently experience the corrective recapitulation of the primary family group. As group members become familiar with one another, they often mimic one another's behaviors. This contributes to their socialization. The development of socializing techniques refers to the learning of basic social skills. As relationships with group members develop, members may learn about the concepts, processes, and outcomes involved in interpersonal relationships, or interpersonal learning. Group cohesiveness refers to the level of trust and feelings of belongingness members' experience. Catharsis is the verbal expression of emotions. The final concept, existential factors, suggests that the realization of difficult realities may occur.

No systematic research concerning the group support processes of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association has been conducted. Little is known about this group and how its members communicate with one another. It is unknown whether Yalom's theoretical model is applicable to the experiences of members. This group does not have the assistance of a trained specialist. Instead, the members are responsible for its operations. Although this type of group is not unique in the prison context, previous research examining group functions in prison has concentrated on psychotherapeutic groups (e.g., Dixon, 2000; Morgan et al., 1999). These studies have revealed that inmates participating in these programs have benefited in terms of lowered recidivism rates, decreases in drug use, universality, interpersonal learning, information sharing, and

providing opportunities to reflect on previous behaviors and attitudes and to discuss future conduct (Dixon, 2000; Morgan et al., 1999; Wexler et al., 1999).

To achieve the goal of rehabilitation as stated in its mission, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections supports a variety of treatment programs for offenders. Although it is not the group's primary purpose, anecdotal evidence suggests that membership in the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association may nevertheless contribute to the rehabilitation of an offender by providing social support. Individuals who have attended meetings in the past have suggested to the author that they may serve social support functions to members. Relevant literature also suggests that support group participation is associated with variety of social support-related outcomes (e.g., Ferencik, 1990; Kurtz, 1990; McKay et al., 1994; Mok, 2001; Schindler, 1999). In addition, the population of interest has unique needs that can only be addressed by other lifers (Robinson, 2004). Pennsylvania Lifers' Association meetings provide a forum in which individuals with common experiences can interact, which increases the likelihood that social support will be communicated during their meetings. However, little is known about how social support is communicated among group members during these meetings. This dissertation addressed the following research question:

RQ₁: How do members of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association communicate social support to one another during regular meetings?

Group Experiences

Previous research has suggested that social support groups provide a variety of benefits to members. Related scholarship explains that they can be advantageous in improving individuals' psychological, behavioral, physical, and relational well-being. Specifically, support groups contribute to psychological well-being through a decrease of depressive symptoms (McDurmet et al., 2001; Vandervoort & Fuhriman, 1991), an increase in the appearance over time of therapeutic factors, including the instillation of hope, universality, familial recapitulation, cohesiveness, imparting information, and catharsis (MacNair-Semands & Lese, 2000), decreases in posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms for women with multiple traumatic experiences (Lubin et al., 1998), and inspired feelings of being uplifted, camaraderie, positive coping, and belief of being helped by and having helped other group members (Greenstein, 2000; Greenstein & Breitbart, 2000; Mok, 2001). Positive changes in behavior have included increased levels of activism in parents of children with cancer (Chesney & Chesler, 1993) and desistence of drug and alcohol usage (Kurtz, 1990; McKay et al., 1994). Physical benefits evidenced include a decrease in cirrhosis death rates correlated with an increase in Alcoholics Anonymous membership (Humphreys & Ribisl, 1999) and a buffering effect that decrease physical harm caused by stress (Goldsmith, 2004). Relational benefits reportedly emerging from participation in support groups have included improved interpersonal relationships (Mok, 2001), increased social interaction skills (Schindler, 1999), and the development of interpersonal problem-solving skills (Ferencik, 1990). In addition, spirituality, which has been linked to psychological well-being (McClain et al.,

2003), has been shown to be a significant component of social support groups (e.g., Ronel & Libman, 2003; Sageman, 2004; Uva, 1991). In contrast, some research indicates that social support groups may have no positive or even detrimental effects on members. In addition, other research suggests that even when effects are positive, they are not lasting (Kang et al., 1991). The costs and benefits associated with membership in social support groups in prison, then, are unclear.

An evaluation of the costs and benefits associated with the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association could be valuable in explaining why group members continue to participate in spite of the setbacks throughout the years. *Social exchange theory* suggests that one will participate in activities, or exchanges, with others if he or she perceives that the benefits of the exchange outweigh the costs (Cook & Emerson, 1978). Applying this theory to the group members, it is likely that these individuals perceive the benefits of group membership to be greater than the costs.

In addition, an analysis of the costs and benefits can be useful to the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections. As explained, the goals of the Department of Corrections include security, rehabilitation, deterrence, incapacitation, and retribution (Dunbar & Langdon, cited in Jewkes & Letherby, 2002; Lauen, 1988). The implementation and continuation of prison programs requires a great many of resources, including material resources, as well as additional staff. Prison administrators develop strict schedules in efforts to decrease security risks. Prisoners attending programs must deviate from routine schedules, which increases security threats. In Pennsylvania, the Department of Corrections is currently decreasing the use of inmate-run prison programs. Although the reasoning behind this decision could not be determined, it is likely to be related to the

financial costs and security concerns related to prison programs. By examining costs and benefits of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association, as perceived by the group members, a more complete understanding of the value, or lack thereof, of the group to its members, and indirectly, the penitentiary can be created.

Nearly all research examining the processes of support groups in prison has focused on those run by professionals rather than inmates (e.g., Dixon, 2000; Morgan et al., 1999; Wexler et al., 1999). Very little is known about how prisoners conduct themselves in groups without professional moderators. Because there are gaps in the literature concerning inmate-run groups and the costs and benefits of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association, this dissertation explored these areas. The following research question was addressed:

RQ₂: How do members of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association describe their experiences with the group?

Factor Structure of Social Support

Weiss (1974) developed a theoretical model that explicates social functions as provided by others. He identified six: guidance, reliable alliance, reassurance of worth, attachment, social integration, and an opportunity for nurturance. Guidance refers to advice or information offered by another. Reliable alliance is the feeling of dependability that others are available and willing to provide aid in times of need or stress. Reassurance of worth refers to the experience of realizing an individual's value or competence. A

feeling of emotional closeness or bonding with another is attachment. Social integration refers to the feeling of belonging to a group. Finally, the opportunity for nurturance refers to the state one experiences when one recognizes that others are dependent on him or her. According to Weiss, although all six functions are necessary to feel support, some are more relevant in certain situations. For example, one who has recently failed at a task may have a stronger need for reassurance of worth.

Weiss (1974) also notes that certain types of relationships generally correspond to each type of social function. For example, a close friend is likely to provide a great deal of reliable alliance, whereas a parent would bestow guidance. As noted, personal relationships often deteriorate during incarceration. The absence of certain individuals and relationships in a prisoner's life would likely lead to a decrease in social support in reference to one or more of the components in the model. As Weiss points out, the absence of any of the six could result in an overall decrease in the perception of the amount of social support one receives.

Social support has been linked to psychological well-being in numerous studies examining a variety of populations (e.g., Cummings, 2002; Stone, 2001), which make an understanding of the communication of social support highly desirable. Because of the absence of literature concerning life-sentenced inmates, it is unclear whether the current knowledge concerning social support is applicable to this population. For this reason, the following research question was developed:

RQ₃: Does the structure of social support in groups differ between those in free society and life-sentenced inmates?

This chapter has detailed current trends in the American penal system, research regarding social support groups, both in free society and in penitentiaries, and provided justification for why the lifer population should be explored, particularly within the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association. Furthermore, the basis for the three research questions addressed was explained. Chapter 2 presents the methods and procedures utilized by the author.

Chapter 2

Methods and Procedures

This chapter details the methods used to collect the data pertaining to the three research questions discussed at the end of Chapter 1. Specifically, the chapter discusses sampling procedures and participant recruitment, participant characteristics, procedures, measures, and data analysis. Methodologies used in the study consisted of observations, interviews, and surveys.

Participants and Procedures

As noted above, this study incorporated a variety of research methods. The observational portion of the study was related to Research Question 1 and focused on how members of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association communicate social support during weekly meetings. Eight life-sentenced inmates who had been elected to the board of trustees of the SCI-Huntingdon chapter of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association were in attendance at the regular meetings. In addition, three members of the Pennsylvania Prison Society, a prisoners' activist organization, were present. However, not all 11 participants were present at every meeting. The board members consisted of males convicted of first- or second-degree murder, with incarceration lengths ranging from 11 to 29 ($M = 19.75$) years. The individuals reported their time as active members in the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association as ranging from 1 to 27 ($M = 13.13$) years. Six of the eight identified themselves as African American or black, whereas two reported being

white or non-Hispanic. The three Pennsylvania Prison Society members who participated in the study were white or non-Hispanic females. One attended meetings on a regular basis and had an ongoing relationship with board members, whereas the others attended only one meeting as fill-ins when a regular member was ill. All 11 participants willingly participated and signed informed consent forms.

The interview portion of the study was concerned with how members of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association describe their experiences with the group, and applied to Research Question 2. The study was initially planned to use a random sample consisting of 20 of the 158 Pennsylvania Lifers' Association members housed at SCI-Huntingdon; however, a staff member at SCI-Huntingdon who was familiar with the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association recommended that the eight board members be included in the sample. The remaining 12 individuals were referred to the author by the board members. The reasoning behind the change in plan was that many life-sentenced inmates who were members of the group had limited interaction with other members. Board members and their close associates tend to be more involved, and therefore, data from these individuals presumably would be more in-depth and rich.

In view of the staff member's suggestion, a snowball sample was used to recruit 20 volunteer participants. All participants were male inmates who had been convicted of first- or second-degree murder, were serving one or more life sentences, and were active members of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association. Of the 20, 14 identified themselves as African American or black, 4 as white or non-Hispanic, 1 as Hispanic or Latino, and 1 as Native American. All participants had been incarcerated between 5 and 29 ($M = 19.80$)

years and had been active members of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association between 1 and 30 ($M = 13.05$) years.

The survey portion of the study was designed to explore whether the structure of social support in groups differs between those in free society and life-sentenced inmates. The survey portion was designed to include participants who were life-sentenced inmates housed in the Pennsylvania State Correctional Institutions at Huntingdon, Dallas, Graterford, and Rockview. These institutions were selected because each has an active chapter of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association. Although the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections approved survey distribution in all four penitentiaries, the data collection was not completed at SCI-Dallas because approval from administration was not granted until data collection had ended. Surveys were distributed at the remaining three institutions.

The study was initially designed to have random sample of all life-sentenced inmates within these institutions; however, due to the low response rate, surveys were distributed to all members of the lifer population at these institutions. In all, 1,477 surveys were distributed. Of these, 286 were completed and returned, including 105 from inmates at SCI-Huntingdon, 84 from inmates at SCI-Rockview, and 97 from inmates at SCI-Graterford. This presented a 19.4% overall return rate.

In no portion of the study did participants receive financial compensation. They could request copies of the final manuscript, however. Selected demographic information of the participants is appears in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant Information

Observation Participants (N = 8)		N	% of n
Length of Membership			
	1-5 years	2	25.0%
	6-15 years	3	37.5%
	16-30 years	3	37.5%
Age			
	26-32	1	12.5%
	33-40	2	25.0%
	41-48	3	37.5%
	49-54	1	12.5%
	55+	1	12.5%
Ethnicity			
	African American or Black	6	75.0%
	White or Non-Hispanic	2	25.0%
	Hispanic or Latino	0	0.0%
	Native American	0	0.0%
First Time Offenders		4	50.0%
Years Incarcerated			
	5-10 years	0	0.0%
	11-20 years	5	62.5%
	21-30 years	3	37.5%
	30+ years	0	0.0%
Interview Participants (N = 20)			
Length of Membership			
	1-5 years	7	35.0%
	6-15 years	6	30.0%
	16-30 years	7	35.0%
Age			
	26-32	3	15.0%
	33-40	6	30.0%
	41-48	6	30.0%
	49-54	4	20.0%
	55+	1	5.0%
Ethnicity			
	African American or Black	14	70.0%
	White or Non-Hispanic	4	20.0%
	Hispanic or Latino	1	5.0%
	Native American	1	5.0%
First Time Offenders		15	75.0%
Years Incarcerated			
	5-10 years	2	10.0%
	11-20 years	9	45.0%
	21-30 years	8	30.0%
	30+ years	1	5.0%

Gaining Entry and Consent

Throughout much of the 20th century, numerous medical experiments were involving prisoners were conducted around the world. Often, the prisoners were coerced into participation, without enough details to make informed judgments, or had no choice in the matter. In addition, many caused serious physical and mental harm to the subjects (Etheridge, 1972; Hornblum, 1997; Hornblum, 1998). Prison advocates questioned the ethical implications of conducting research on institutionalized individuals. In response to the controversy, a federal ban ended such medical research in 1976 (Hornblum, 1997). Although this particular study did not involve medical research, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, nevertheless, had to take precautions to ensure that research participants were not coerced and that participation was completely voluntary (G. Zajac, personal communication, January 25, 2005). Therefore, gaining access to this population required the approval of not only the participants, but also the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, The Pennsylvania State University Institutional Review Board, and the administration of each correctional facility involved.

Upon the recommendation of Dr. John Kramer, the author of this dissertation joined the Pennsylvania Prison Society, an advocacy group for inmates and their families, and applied for Official Visitor status. This allowed for communication with individuals who had experience working with the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association, as well as placed the author under the guidelines outlined by the Official Visitation of Prisons Act of 1990 (Official visitations, 2004). The process of becoming an Official Visitor included the completion of an application, criminal background check, and professional referrals.

Confirmation of membership and Official Visitors status occurred approximately three months after submission.

Little information regarding the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association in document form exists. Therefore, the connections made through the Pennsylvania Prison Society proved to be valuable when attempting to gain approval for the study from The Pennsylvania State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The author contacted a member of the Pennsylvania Prison Society, as well as an employee of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Office of Planning, Research, Statistics, and Grants numerous times via electronic mail in an effort to collect information about the board meetings which was required to complete the IRB application. After approximately three months, the study was approved by the IRB.

The author completed the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections' Research Approval Request Form. This was submitted to the Office of Planning, Research, Statistics, and Grants along with copies of the informed and implied consent forms, interview script, survey, criminal background check approval, and the author's curriculum vitae. This application was approved nearly one month later.

While applying for permission to conduct research, SCI-Pittsburgh closed permanently. The remaining four institutions for which the author was approved to conduct research included SCI-Huntingdon, SCI-Dallas, SCI-Graterford, and SCI-Rockview. The activity managers at each institution were contacted. The author explained the purpose of the study to each activity manager and provided each with copies of the implied consent forms and surveys. The activity manager at SCI-Huntingdon also received a copy of the interview script and corresponding informed

consent form because all interviews were to take place at this institution. Three of the four activity managers agreed to assist with the project. Each activity manager was provided envelopes with a recruitment letter, survey instrument, and implied consent form enclosed. These were distributed to all inmates with life sentences. A total of 1,477 surveys was distributed. Of these, 286 were returned, with a response rate of 19.4%.

The activity manager at SCI-Huntingdon made a brief announcement about the research project at a weekly meeting of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association. This was to inform the members that the author would be attending the meetings from April through June. Board members who did not wish to be observed were advised not to attend these meetings. All eight members volunteered to participate and continued attending the meetings.

The author recruited participants at the conclusion of the weekly board meeting. All eight board members agreed to participate in the interviews. In addition, the group volunteered to ask other members to participate. The group compiled a list of 20 individuals. This sample comprised of 12.7% of the total members of the SCI-Huntingdon chapter of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association. The activity manager scheduled all interviews and placed the participants names on the call sheet so that they would be able to travel to the activities room at the designated times.

Meeting Observations

The author observed eleven weekly SCI-Huntingdon Pennsylvania Lifers' Association board meetings. Generally, all eight board members and one representative

from the Pennsylvania Prison Society were in attendance. In addition, one or two staff members were in the room at all times. The staff members did not typically participate in the meeting, but were available for security purposes and to answer any questions posed by the inmates or guests. All individuals present agreed to be observed and signed informed consent forms (see Appendix A). Because no recording devices or laptop computers were permitted within the penitentiary, notes were taken by hand using a pen and paper during the meetings and transferred to electronic format soon after each meeting. Frequently, the Pennsylvania Prison Society volunteer remained after meetings to discuss the meetings with the author. Her comments were useful in determining which behaviors were typical for the group and for understanding the relationships between the inmates and staff members, as well as the history of the group.

The author sought to collect data through complete observation to minimize bias and increase objectivity. However, the norms of the group dictated that all individuals in attendance be treated as guests and addressed accordingly. Therefore, the author acted as a participant observer and provided input when asked by the group members.

Interviews with Key Informants

Twenty members of the SCI-Huntingdon Pennsylvania Lifers' Association took part in face-to-face interviews. These interviews were arranged by the activities manager, and each was scheduled to last a maximum of 2 hours. Actual interview times varied from 45 minutes to 2 hours. All interviews took place in the activities room under the supervision of one or two staff members.

To minimize the effects of staff presence on internal validity, the author and participant positioned themselves at a distance so that their discussion would not be audible to staff. All participants signed an informed consent form (see Appendix B). Interviews were structured according to a predetermined script (see Appendix C). The author deviated from the script only to probe for further details or if the participants suggest valuable information not prompted for by the script. The specific script items permitted the exploration of the decision-making process involved in joining the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association, current group satisfaction, perceived costs and benefits of membership, changes in relational experiences, spirituality, dedication to the group, and future expectations. Demographic information also was gathered to aid in the description of participants.

The Department of Corrections' regulations do not permit audio recording devices or laptop computers on penitentiary premises. Therefore, the data were recorded by the author using a pen and paper. This information was then transferred into a word processor for subsequent analysis. Participant responses were examined in an effort to determine emergent themes. This was done first by identifying patterns and labeling axial codes. The axial codes were then collapsed into a set of recurrent themes. These themes aided in revealing more completely how members of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association describe their experiences with the group.

Measures

Weiss (1974) noted that guidance, reliable alliance, reassurance of worth, attachment, social integration, and an opportunity for nurturance are provisions of social relationships. Building from this assertion, Cutrona and Russell (1987) developed the Social Provisions Scale. This scale has 24 items, with four corresponding to each of Weiss' six categories of social support. This scale has been used in numerous studies as a measure of social support (e.g., Caron, Tempier, Mercier, & Leouffre, 1998; Quimby & O'Brien, 2004), with an overall reliability reported as high as .92, and acceptable Cronbach's alphas for each subscale: attachment (.75), social integration (.67), reassurance of worth (.67), reliable alliance (.65), guidance (.76), and opportunity for nurturance (.67) (Cutrona & Russell, 1987). These subscales represent six distinct, but correlated factors.

Two-hundred-eighty-six inmates serving life sentences completed a survey utilizing items from Cutrona and Russell's (1987) Social Provisions Scale. They were from within three Pennsylvania State Correctional facilities; each completed the survey (see Appendix D) and an implied consent form (see Appendix E). Each item had an accompanying four-point scale in the Likert format, with 1 representing "strongly disagree," 2 "disagree," 3 "agree," and 4 "strongly agree."

Data Analysis

Each method of data collection was tied to a different one of three research questions. Each method yielded different types of data; therefore, the methods of analysis varied for each type.

Analysis of Observation Data

Observation data served to reveal how members of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association communicate social support to one another during regular board meetings. Data collected by pen and paper during meetings were altered into electronic form. After each weekly meeting, the author reread the notes from previous weeks and added notes. These additional notes were used for interpreting interactions from previous weeks not well understood at the time. At the completion of the observations, all notes were read again to familiarize the author with the data.

The data consisted of verbal and nonverbal interactions of the board members. These interactions were unitized temporally and thematically. In other words, sentences and behaviors regarding similar topics and taking place close together in time would be regarded as an individual unit. Data that differed either temporally or thematically were contained in separate units. After the data were divided into units, these units were then categorized. Phrases and interactions perceived by the author to reflect similar themes were grouped together.

Categories were identified on the basis of a coding scheme developed from the 11 therapeutic factors identified by Yalom (1995). These factors were selected because Yalom's theoretical framework of social support has been useful in explaining the social support experience in a variety of contexts (e.g., Citron, Solomon, & Draine, 1999; Spiegel & Classen, 2000; Weinburg, Uken, Schmale, & Adamek, 1995). Eight of the 11 factors emerged from the data: instillation of hope, universality, imparting information, altruism, the corrective recapitulation of the primary family group, imitative behavior, development of socializing techniques, and group cohesiveness. These categories accounted for most statements and behaviors related to social support. The remaining statements served to emphasize the value of members and were coded as reassurance of worth, as defined by Weiss (1974). Because only one researcher coded the data, there was no estimate of reliability.

Analysis of Interview Data

In analyzing the data for interviews, the author first became as familiar with the data as possible. This entailed converting the written material into electronic form and reading the data and related field notes repeatedly. During this process, the author added further notations to the data, including ones relating to perceived meaning, emotions, and ongoing findings.

After becoming familiar with the data, the author began to open-code responses. To accomplish this, responses were first divided into units of data. Generally, units of data constituted complete responses to individual questions; however, a few responses

were divided into multiple units. This occurred only when responses were unusually long or the respondent discussed multiple topics while answering a single question. Each unit of data was read and assigned a code derived directly from the language used within the unit. Some units of data were perceived as reflective of more than one topic. In these instances, the author assigned multiple codes to a unit. This procedure resulted in a total of 1,080 codes.

Next, the author conducted axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This involved examining the derived codes and looking for similarities. Codes that referenced similar topics were grouped, and code names were combined. Reasons for making changes or combining codes were noted by the author. After the codes were combined, 63 general codes were the result. These general codes were then divided into 11 domains. Domains were overarching categories that encompassed the primary subject matter of the organized units. Domains included: decision to become a member, goals, control, solidarity, identity, intergroup bias, responsibility, member relations, group satisfaction, costs and benefits, and future. Table 2 includes all general codes and domains.

Table 2: Interview Code List

Decision to Become a Member Initial Contact Curiosity about the group Parole for lifers Group-sponsored programs Helping others Uncertain expectations	Responsibility Individual responsibility Group responsibility
Goals Group goals Parole for lifers Participation in group programs Personal agendas Court issues Conflicting goals Helping nonmembers	Member Relations Diversity Member strengths Respect Friends/associates Transfers
Control Power Administration issues Barriers Transfers	Group Satisfaction Working together Compared with the past
Solidarity Synergy Unity Universality Trust Group importance	Costs and Benefits Information sharing Relational experiences Spirituality Social support Problem-solving Anger Depression Stress Daily difficulties Self efficacy Loneliness Forgiveness Self-esteem Time Monetary expenses Staff relations Personal (dis)satisfaction Skills Maturity Emptiness
Identity Personal identity Relational identity Enacted identity Communal identity	Future Hope Membership rates Death

Analysis of Survey Data

The survey data provided a basis for answering Research Question 3. Cutrona and Russell's (1987) Social Provisions Scale had previously proved to be a good measure of attachment, social integration, reassurance of worth, reliable alliance, guidance, and opportunity for nurturance. To determine whether the structure of social support in groups differed for those in free society and life-sentenced inmates, the author conducted a factor analysis of the data collected from the participants and compared the results with findings published by the scale's authors. Because the initial results utilizing correlations of the items and confirmatory factor analysis did not match the a priori dimensions as described by Cutrona and Russell (1987), the author conducted a separate exploratory factor analysis to determine precisely how the 24 items clustered.

This chapter has provided details of the methods used to collect data. It has presented information pertaining to sampling procedures and participant recruitment, descriptions of the participants, procedures, measurement tools, and data analysis. The next chapter presents specific findings relating to the observation, interview, and survey data.

Chapter 3

Results

As explained in Chapters 1 and 2, three types of data served as bases for answering the three research questions the study addressed. This chapter provides the results of the analysis for observations in meetings, interviews with key informants, and the survey research conducted, as each related to a particular research question.

Meeting Observations

Yalom (1995) identified 11 primary factors that he felt constituted the therapeutic experience: instillation of hope, universality, imparting information, altruism, the corrective recapitulation of the primary family group, imitative behavior, development of socializing techniques, interpersonal learning, group cohesiveness, catharsis, and existential factors. Although his research was primarily concerned with experiences in psychotherapy groups, Kurtz (1997) believes that Yalom's (1995) view appropriately applies to self-help and social support groups. Through analysis of data collected during observations of the board meetings of the SCI-Huntingdon chapter of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association, the author was able to identify behavior representative of eight of the eleven factors. Some interactions related to social support could not be explained in terms of any of Yalom's factors. These were more reflective of Weiss's (1974) construct, reassurance of worth. Details and examples of representative behavior appear below.

Instillation of hope. Statements made by participants that reflected hope centered primarily on Senate Resolution 149. Many of these statements functioned to clarify the processes needed for Senate Resolution 149 to be implemented. During meetings, several participants suggested that they did not think commutation was possible because of recent changes in legislation. However, when Senate Resolution 149 was discussed, it aroused optimism.

Senate Resolution 149 dictated that a Joint State Government Commission research the issues of geriatric, seriously ill and life-sentenced inmate population within Pennsylvania state penitentiaries and make recommendations based upon this research. The commission included representatives from the Departments of Corrections, the state Parole Board, Commission on Crime and Delinquency, Sentencing Commission, various prisoner activist organizations, and aging and health researchers. The group drafted a bill that would allow life-sentenced individuals over the age of 50 and incarcerated for greater than 25 years to be parole eligible.

If this bill were adopted and implemented, it would allow only new life sentences to be parole eligible, but could pave the way for retroactive life sentence parole eligibility. The representative from the Pennsylvania Prison Society explained the process that would be required for Senate Resolution 149 to be adopted. She spoke cautiously in an effort to explain the long, complex process without providing false hope. While she spoke, all group members were silent and faced her. Those in attendance seemed pleased that any progress at all was being made. One exclaimed, "I would really like to see a copy of that report." This demonstrated that the group members were interested in receiving information that could provide hope for their situation.

During the course of the study, the participants worked on a proposal to bring in a guest speaker. This speaker was a prison activist and lobbyist who supported Senate Resolution 149. Although the reason cited for desiring this speaker was to convey current information to the group members, it was clear from his speech and the excitement of the group that this presentation also served to bring hope to the participants. The speaker attempted to motivate the life-sentenced population to get involved through an instillation of hope. During his speech, he repeatedly stressed that the passage and implementation of Senate Resolution 149 was possible, and that the group had stimulated a great deal of progress during the previous five years. By emphasizing the positive steps the group had already taken toward its goal, he provided hope to the members that the primary goal is obtainable if they continue to work hard.

Other actions interpreted as instilling hope occurred when participants brought letters from outside individuals and groups addressed to the board. These often included testimonials from others who maintained hope and wished to convey this message to the participants. These letters were read verbatim and seemed to be particularly important to the members. Furthermore, the group discussed the organization of support they were receiving from those in general society. For example, the activist group Fight for Lifers held a conference in a major city in Pennsylvania to convey information, raise awareness of the lifers' plight, and encourage support. The participants told one another about family members and friends who attended the conference and their experiences. Members placed emphasis on the number of individuals who attended. It was explained during the interview portion of the study that the number of individuals was representative of support for the group. They believed that the greater the amount of support, the greater

the possibility of legislative change. Therefore, when group members discussed the amount of support they received from others, this served to instill hope.

During one meeting, a participant mentioned that he heard of a lifer at another institution who was reviewed for commutation and denied by only one member of the commutation board. The board member who denied his application reportedly was no longer on the board. This was interpreted by the participants as a positive sign that commutations might occur in the future, which provided hope for their individual situations.

Universality. During the three months of observations, there was not a single verbal statement of universality. However, this does not necessarily mean that it is without significance to the group members. In fact, it is likely that because the participants have been working together for an extended period of time and are familiar with one another's backgrounds that a feeling of similarity is so ingrained that it does not need to be continually expressed. Group members seemed to have a strong identification with one another. Instead of continually mentioning their similar pasts, the group focused on future. Furthermore, evidence from the interview portion of the survey suggests that universality is important to group members. This will be discussed in detail later.

Imparting information. Imparting information was the factor most frequently in evidence among the group members. In fact, approximately half of all meetings were labeled "business" by the group's president, during which time, the group's primary task was to impart information. Much of the information presented could be interpreted as serving a task function rather than fulfilling socio-emotional needs. However, some researchers may acknowledge that these statements serve both functions. Furthermore,

the group frequently discussed and planned to bring in an outside speaker to inform and motivate the group. This demonstrates that the group intentionally was working to impart information.

Several board members were imprisoned in different correctional institutions prior to their incarceration at SCI-Huntingdon. These individuals had experiences with various chapters of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association. When discussing events and plans at SCI-Huntingdon, they were able to impart information and give advice based on their previous experiences. For example, a proposal by the group to distribute a newsletter was denied. One participant suggested that at a former penitentiary, the group was allowed to distribute "bulletin updates," but not "newsletters." The two terms have the same referent, but one is typically allowed, and the other is not. Therefore, the individual was able to impart knowledge that subsequently aided the group.

Information concerning legislation related to the lifer population apparently was particularly important to this group. Members asked one another week after week about issues such as Senate Resolution 149 and the Freedom of Information Act. One event the group prioritized was the organization of an event in which a guest speaker would address the SCI-Huntingdon chapter on the current research and public attitude regarding Senate Resolution 149. Each week, the group members imparted information detailing the progress toward gaining approval of the speaker. In addition, they brought newspaper clippings containing supplementary information. Some group members were unsure of their rights as outlined by the Freedom of Information Act, or how to go about obtaining information. Other group members who had more experience exercising these rights were able to provide guidance to those in need.

Other group members communicated with individuals outside the prison on a regular basis. These individuals were able to bring news of law cases and legislative issues to the group. As members received letters from those on the outside, they brought them to the meetings and read them to the group. For example, the president was waiting to receive the minutes from a recent conference related to the lifers. He wanted to provide this information to the group, but knew there was a chance he would be transferred before he received it. He told the group, "I'm still waiting on the reports from the Fight for Lifers Conference. I should get it Friday. If I get transferred before I get it, I'll make sure a copy gets sent to you."

Altruism. As Yalom (1995) asserted, many individuals experiencing traumatic and stressful events experience demoralization because they feel they are no longer able to help others. This may be particularly salient for inmates who are often viewed as a burden to society. During board meetings, participants often offered advice to other members. In addition, some displayed small gestures of kindness, such as offering others candy or a tissue. The group considered beginning a project that would require a substantial amount of work from the secretary. He accepted this workload graciously and another individual said, "If we decide to do that bulletin board thing, I'll help you." Volunteers were sought to help set up for the annual picnic. Over half of the group members volunteered right away.

It is interesting that the group as a whole, rather than individual members, participated in a variety of altruistic acts. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the group aimed to raise funds for outside organizations. In addition, the group supported programs, such as the Alternatives to Violence Programs, which functioned to help the inmate population as

a whole. When the group heard that a lifer at another institution passed away, they worked together to file the proper paperwork to have flowers sent to his family.

The corrective recapitulation of the primary family group. Previous research has shown that many individuals who participate in therapeutic groups have had unsatisfactory experiences with their primary family (Yalom, 1995). Many individuals have minimal or no contact with family members after incarceration, which suggested that developing a secondary family may be particularly important. Because observations of this group did not include the assimilation phase of group development, many instances of family formation may not have been apparent. However, it seemed as though some aspects of an emerging family group were evident.

Yalom (1995) claimed that groups often develop deep personal revelations, strong emotions, authority/parental figures, peer siblings, deep intimacy, and hostile or competitive feelings. When speaking, the president was generally given the full attention of the other board members. He was rarely interrupted, and when he was, he corrected those responsible. The president was clearly in charge and could be viewed as a parental figure. The other members could be considered peer siblings. They referred to one another as “brothers.” During the study, two life-sentenced inmates passed away. The participants discussed the deaths, the lives of the individuals, and expressed emotion similar to that of a sibling. During one meeting, hostility surfaced. Two individuals became involved in an argument before the meeting began. This argument was unrelated to the group task. During another meeting, one individual asked questions perceived by another participant as juvenile. These participants then had a verbal altercation. Neither argument was intense; both involved trivial matters, similar to arguments between

siblings. There was no evidence of deep personal revelations or deep intimacy. Although these sorts of behavior could be interpreted as the corrective recapitulation of the primary family group, there is not enough evidence to state this with certainty. It is possible that these actions are common to many groups not serving this function.

Imitative behavior. The board members had a strict routine they followed at each meeting. As each individual arrived, he greeted all in attendance and then participated in general conversation. When all or most board members were present, the president would call the meeting to order and begin with a moment of silence. He said, "I would like to call this meeting to order and begin with a moment of silence." After a brief silence, he would continue, "Next, I'd like to have the secretary read the minutes from the last meeting." He would then moderate the meeting by requesting reports from each individual in attendance. After each individual spoke, the president would ask if there were any additional questions, respond accordingly, and finally adjourn the meeting. This structure was characteristic of the first 10 of 11 meetings.

Prior to the final meeting, the president was transferred to another penitentiary. Another board member fulfilled the role of the president and carried on the meeting in the exact format. In fact, the wording the individual used was identical to the former president's when calling the meeting to order, beginning the moment of silence, and instructing the minutes to be read. It is possible that other behavior had been imitated by group members; however, it is likely that behavior patterns would have been altered between the formation of the current board and the time period when the author observed. Therefore, changes in behavior resembling imitation would not have been apparent.

Development of socializing techniques. When members of the group discussed information during the business portion of the meeting, they made an effort to use formal language and correct grammar. They were generally very polite to one another. Members typically looked at the speaker, took notes attentively, nodded when appropriate, and avoided interrupting other speakers. The president moderated conversation and other all submitted to this. This may be the result of learning of social skills during group meetings; however, that was not clear.

When the participants spoke to one another during the general discussion, they tended to do so in a more colloquial manner. For example, one said, "I got stuff on my mind. Why are you playing?" Another conversation included the following:

"Damn, they cancelled the membership meeting?"

"Yeah."

"Man, I've been going around telling everybody to be there."

"I know. I've been telling them that, too."

This excerpt took place after the meeting adjourned, and various members were engaged in multiple conversations.

Group cohesiveness. Group cohesiveness was most evident before meetings began and during general discussion. Prior to meetings, participants arrived and greeted one another. Pleasantries were exchanged during this time and positive relationships between individuals were evident. For example, most group members shook one another's hands. Some group members asked friendly questions, such as, "How was your week?" In addition, when discussing members of the group, individuals generally addressed the group as "we," demonstrating identification. Three of the group's members suggested that they intended to nominate themselves to run in the next election. This

suggests a desire to continue working with the group. Interpersonal attraction among members, identification with the group, and expressions of interest in future group participation have been identified as a means of determining levels of group cohesiveness (Cartwright, cited in Keyton, 1999).

Reassurance of worth. Reassurance of worth was evident when participants acknowledged the value of others in the group. For example, when the president announced that he was being transferred, he informed the group of his nomination for the acting president and vice president. When this was announced, one participant said, “I feel that it’s a good suggestion to make ____ president and I think ____ would make a good vice president.” This showed confidence in the ability of other group members.

As mentioned previously, two life-sentenced individuals passed away during the study. When this occurred, board members spent a great deal of time discussing the individuals, their deaths, and what the group could do to support the individuals’ families. This discussion served not only to reassure the worth of the individuals who had passed away, but also to reaffirm the worth of *all* life-sentenced individuals. It seemed to be important to the group members that they use the names of these individuals and spend time discussing them. In addition, they brought news articles and the memorial service programs to the meeting to show to the guests. When telling about one of the deceased, a participant said,

He was in the mob and he was a stand-up guy. He’d tell anyone where to stick it. One time, they wanted him to rat. He said, ‘You’ve got the wrong _____. He’s down the hall.’ There was another guy named _____ who was a snitch, but he never would.

Another participant brought a picture of this individual and a newspaper article with biographical information. The board members only discussed the positive attributes of those who had passed away and stressed the value of these individuals.

Others mentioned briefly during the meetings that they had participated in programs sponsored by the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association and that they would like to include or support additional programs. During the interviews, participants elaborated on their experiences with the programs. They suggested that these programs served to improve participants' perceptions of self-worth.

There was no evidence of interpersonal learning, catharsis, or existential factors during meeting observations. The next section details the results of analysis conducted on the interviews with key informants.

Interviews with Key Informants

Interviews were completed in an effort to investigate how members of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association describe their experiences with the group. From analyzing the data derived from the interview portion of the study, 63 general codes surfaced within 11 domains. These domains include the decision to become a member, goals, control, solidarity, identity, intergroup bias, responsibility, member relations, group satisfaction, costs and benefits, and future. The domains will be explored along with the codes for each to provide a greater understanding of how participants describe membership of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association.

Decision to Become a Member

Participants answered questions related to their decision to become members of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association. In doing so, participants' responses focused on how they initially heard about the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association, curiosity about the group, parole for lifers, group-sponsored programs, helping others, and uncertain expectations.

Initial contact. Initial contact was defined as the first time an individual received information about the group. Eighteen of the twenty participants indicated that they had first heard about the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association from existing members of the group. One of these individuals said that he also saw a memo posted on the bulletin board about an upcoming meeting. The other two participants heard about the group from incarcerated family members. In all cases, word of mouth led to the initial contact. In addition, all participants spoke about the initial contact in a positive manner. The initial contact could be particularly important in light of scholarly literature concerning the primacy effect (e.g., Hovland, Campbell, & Brock, 1957). Applied to this situation, it is possible that the initial contact was highly persuasive in one's decision to become a member.

Curiosity about the group. Units coded as curiosity about the group included statements to the effect that an individual received ambiguous information about the group and wished to learn more. Participants who made statements regarding curiosity made group-oriented remarks, rather than comments regarding their own situation. For example, one participant said, "I wanted to see what they were getting into. I wanted to

see their topics and things.” These individuals did not express clear expectations for the group.

Parole for lifers. Units coded as “parole for lifers” included statements regarding changing the laws prohibiting parole for life-sentenced inmates or referring to Senate Resolution 149. The most frequent reason for joining the Pennsylvania Lifers’ Association was to help in achieving parole for life-sentenced inmates. When stating this, many participants responded quickly in a matter-of-fact manner, as though this reason was obvious. This behavior signified that the primary goal of the group, as suggested by Paluch (2004), is parole for lifers. Importantly, the group goal matches the goal of many individual members.

Group-sponsored programs. Items code as “group-sponsored programs” included statements concerned with activities encouraged or funded by the Pennsylvania Lifers’ Association. The group sponsors several self-development workshops, including the Alternatives to Violence Program and restorative justice programs. Many individuals who participated in the interview portion of the study commented that they were striving to grow and improve themselves. This seemed to be an expectation of the group which was related to an individual goal. Furthermore, it reflected the ambitious character of many of the members. It is interesting that some participants mentioned that others became members solely to participate in the Pennsylvania Lifers’ Association annual picnic; however, no participants cited this as pivotal in one’s own decision to become a member.

Helping others. Several participants suggested that their membership was a result of their desire to help others. This included others in the penitentiary, as well as in free

society. These statements were coded as “helping others.” For example, one participant said, “It wasn’t about me. It was, like, what could I do for the group? What did I do today? What did I contribute, and to who? Otherwise, it’s all a waste.” When discussing this as a reason for group membership, participants were vague. It is possible that when an individual first joins the Pennsylvania Lifers’ Association, he or she has little specific information as to how the group functions to aid others. When helping others was discussed as a benefit of membership, participants were able to provide specific details. This will be explained further in the discussion of the benefits domain.

Uncertain expectations. Some participants were not able to recall their reasons for joining the group; one even had a misconception about the functions of the group. These units were labeled “uncertain expectations.” Those who were unsure of why they joined seemed troubled when asked this question. Several paused as though they were searching for the “right” answer. For example, “I was unsure of my expectations... I guess I wanted to look into political involvement and change.” One individual responded, “I thought there were ready made plans and connections.” This particular individual seemed frustrated that the group had not made more progress before he joined or was not as structured as he had expected.

When discussing one’s decision to become a member of the Pennsylvania Lifers’ Association, a large percentage of the participants mentioned the goals of the group. The next domain discussed is goals.

Goals

When discussing the goals of the group, some participants focused on the group, whereas others were clearly concerned about their individual situations. Items related to goals included group goals, parole for lifers, participation in group programs, personal agendas, court issues, conflicting goals, and helping nonmembers.

Group goals. Participants' statements that alluded to what the group aimed to accomplish, excluding parole for lifers, were coded as "group goals." Many individuals expressed different goals. This was interpreted to mean that some individuals prioritized certain goals over others. Among the goals of the group were increasing membership, increasing family and friend involvement, increasing restorative justice and conflict resolution programs, fundraising, helping other lifers with legal work, and supplying information. Because of the quantity of statements related to parole for life-sentenced inmates, as well as the expressed importance of this particular goal, units related to this item have been separated from other goals of the group and are discussed next.

Parole for lifers. The most common topic the participants mentioned was the desire to gain parole eligibility for life-sentenced inmates. When discussing parole eligibility, the emotions participants displayed varied greatly. Some were positive, seemingly hopeful, excited, and pleased with the progress of Senate Resolution 149. These emotions were explained with brief statements, such as, "It's highly likely because of the economy of Pennsylvania. Money runs all."

On the other hand, some seemed sad, angry, afraid, and annoyed. Those with negative emotions generally went into further details of the situation. For example, one participant responded:

Not in the near future. Something has to give in, but not in the near future. There're so many things involved. The average guy sees black and white. I see the politicians doing something, even if it's just for second-degrees. You can't just release lifers. They need a half-way house. Besides, where are you going to find a neighborhood to allow lifers and murderers to live?

Those expressing fear seemed to have little or no hope. These individuals concentrated on their own situation, focusing primarily on death. One individual seemed to be rather indifferent to the group's primary goal. He explained that although he would be pleased if the group achieved its goal, it would not be successful in his particular case. He had accepted that he would never be freed, and, therefore, he did not have strong emotions related to the goal.

Participation in group programs. Units that concentrated on the success of Pennsylvania Lifers' Association sponsored programs were labeled with this code. Discussion of group programs was overwhelmingly positive. Some participants told anecdotes about their past participation, as well as desire to continue participating in programs. When discussing participation in group-sponsored programs, some participants displayed characteristics associated with pride. This led the author to believe that participation in these programs could be beneficial to participants' self-esteem.

One program mentioned by a number of participants was the restorative justice program sponsored by the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association. Restorative justice programs aimed at increasing an offender's perception of awareness and responsibility for a crime while also functioning to aid in the coping of the victim or victim's loved ones. In one

participant's story, the inmate explained that he took part in the restorative justice program. Through the program, he learned how to communicate with the victims' loved ones. He said that during the program, he was taught how to express himself in a way that would help the families. He realized that although he wanted to speak freely and honestly with the family, there were things that should not be said because they can be hurtful to the families. He said, "I wanted to contact the families," but because of prison regulations, he was not allowed. Meetings must be requested by family members and many never have the opportunity to apologize. This participant has not yet been able to speak with the victims' families, yet he explained that the program was beneficial because it made him more aware of the perceptions of the family members.

There seemed to be a consensus among the participants that the group should sponsor more programs. In fact, the only negative statements about programs were that there were not enough or that non-group sponsored programs were not open to members of the group because of their sentences. In these cases, participants suggested that the group should work toward the goal of gaining access to additional programs, such as some vocational programs, to life-sentenced inmates. Some noted that the administration created barriers to program implementation. For example, according to one participant,

It's very minimal because the philosophy of the corrections' main tenant is incapacitation. That philosophy serves a purpose, but it hinders a sense of self-responsibility that an individual would like to achieve. In recent years, I've seen an overbearing attitude from the administration toward what lifers are trying to accomplish. For example, the restorative justice program. It was something good, but we still received resistance.

There were several statements similar to this one. Some did not explain why the administration would deny program implementation; others cited security issues.

Frustration was evident in all cases in which administration conflict was mentioned.

Personal agendas. Self-oriented goals discussed by participants were labeled “personal agendas.” In all situations in which a personal agenda was discussed, the participant spoke of an ambiguous other. One participant said, “Some may be a part of the group for self-gratification. They don’t see the big picture.” Most statements identified the roles of those with personal agendas as being a liability to the group. This corresponds to what has been suggested in leadership literature (e.g., Benne & Sheats, 1948); however, one individual’s statement contrasted this idea. He said, “I’ve known a lot of [the members] for a long time. I know how they think and their motives. Everyone has a desire to get the life sentence off. Even those with selfish motives can give beneficial input to the organization.” This individual asserted that an individual may have ulterior motives, but these may still function for the good of the group. This goes against traditional thought regarding self-centered roles.

Court issues. Two participants explained that although they agreed with the goal of the group, the group’s success was not paramount to their circumstances because of current court proceedings. In each of these situations, the participant was still fighting their case in the judicial system. When discussing matters of the Pennsylvania Lifers’ Association, these individuals seemed to be separated from the group and its goals. It was perceived as a conscious attempt to distance themselves from those who had fewer avenues of support. One participant who was not in this situation mentioned that those who were did not have a need for the Pennsylvania Lifers’ Association.

Conflicting goals. Some participants mentioned that the group's goal was changing. This was causing a divide within the group. Comments relating to this were coded as "conflicting goals." Many participants mentioned that Senate Resolution 149, a resolution that consumed much of the group's time and resources, was developed to aid only those with second-degree murder charges and only those convicted after it has been passed. This particular issue seemed to be of great importance to many members. It came up repeatedly, and several placed great emphasis on it. Furthermore, many participants exhibited overt displays of emotion when discussing Senate Resolution 149. In regard to the conflicting goals, the emotions displayed were generally negative. One participant stated, "The focus has shifted. It was about first-degrees, now it's just about the second-degrees who are fighting for minimums and nothing for first-degrees." This participant was clear about his feelings of disgust and betrayal by the group. As a result, he mentioned that he is no longer as active as he once was. Others acknowledged that there was tension within the group; however, they did not necessarily agree with those who were upset. For example, one participant said,

Right now, there is friction with the 25 to life because it only affects the guys with a second-degree conviction and only those who are coming in later. The board had to make a decision and didn't get to consult everyone. Some are mad because it doesn't help them. But, I look at it like our brothers that come in have something to look forward to.

This participant believed that although he would not be affected by Senate Resolution 149, its approval would be positive for the group and the future lifer population; therefore, he viewed the resolution as generally positive.

This particular issue is important to discuss not only because of its apparent importance to the group members, but also because it is representative of

miscommunication within the group. Many of those interviewed discussed Senate Resolution 149. Of those who discussed it, they all mentioned that it benefited only those convicted of second-degree murder, and only those convicted after the date in which the resolution is passed. According to Preate (2005), a prison activist and former attorney general of Pennsylvania, Senate Resolution 149 in its current form does not distinguish between those convicted of first- and second-degree murder. Furthermore, although Senate Resolution 149 does not call for retroactive minimum sentences to be given to those convicted of first- and second-degree murder, it is unclear whether this can be implemented after the adoption of this resolution. Preate did suggest, however, that the adoption of Senate Resolution 149 may serve as a model to help guide future decisions regarding sentence reductions. Therefore, it seems that, if adopted, Senate Resolution 149 would likely be beneficial to the entire Pennsylvania life-sentenced population.

Helping nonmembers. A large percentage of those interviewed discussed activities sponsored by the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association aimed at helping the prison population as a whole or those in free society. When talking about their experiences in these activities, the interviewees spoke positively and several displayed nonverbal signals interpreted as showing pride for their participation. Those who did not display a sense of pride seemed to emphasize that their participation was the result of a sense of duty or responsibility. The following excerpt is representative of how one became a member, his sense of responsibility, and his desire to help:

As a lifer, you seem alone and feel like a minority. You have to look to each other for strength. I really joined because of my involvement in sports. I ref for sports. It helped me learn leadership skills. I have the ability to think and know and to watch individuals through sports. In reffing, we control what happens. When I recognized those skills and what life in prison means, I had to help the younger

guys, help someone else. I've hurt so many for so long that now that I know I want to help others.

Narrative was frequently used to explain how individuals helped with these projects. In each narrative, the speaker emphasized both his role, as well as the benefit to the other. For example, one participant told of his participation in a program in which he and another life-sentenced inmate talked to high school students about their experiences. In this story, he discussed the friendly interaction between the other inmate and himself, the interaction between the students and the inmates, the benefit of "keeping kids out of here," and the pleasure he derived from the simple smiles and claps of those in the audience. During narratives, the language used by those interviewed tended to become more relaxed and natural.

Although most participants acknowledged the benefits of helping others, a few mentioned that this was not the primary reason for participation. As one participant indicated, "Some of this stuff is all second nature to the main goal. We all want to get men out."

The participants were clear with the primary goals of the group. This naturally led to conversations about the ability of the group to accomplish their goals. The next section explores how those interviewed communicated about the group's control and what limitations they perceived.

Control

During the interviews, participants were to comment on the group's overall level of control. This topic was seemingly one of the most sensitive subjects they discussed. Nearly every participant talked at length about it. The four primary codes related to control were: power, administration issues, barriers, and transfers.

Power. Items focusing on the control of the group regarding the ability to communicate with those on the outside, group meetings and interaction, influence on legislation, power within the prison, and control of physical health were labeled "power." When asked how much control the group has, participants answered quickly and firmly. These responses overall were negative, with initial replies ranging from "little" to "none." However, many reversed themselves and explained situations in which they did have control of their lives. There seemed to be consensus that the amount of power the group held was regulated by the administration. Because of the quantity of comments regarding administrative issues, this became a unique code and will be discussed in detail later.

Aspects of power were echoed repeatedly throughout the conversations. This appeared to be one of the greater sources of dissatisfaction. Participants expressed frustration, anger, and hopelessness in explaining their lack of power. Those who acknowledged having some control over their own lives spoke in a generally positive manner. Many mentioned a struggle for power between group members and those on the outside. This was evident particularly in narratives explaining situations with family and friends in which those on the outside did not behave in the manner the participant desired. For example, one interviewee explained that he did not have the influence on his family and friends that he would like. As a result, they were not fighting for the group's cause as

he had requested. Several participants discussed their roles as fathers. In these situations, some felt little or no control as a parent because the child or children's mother did not allow communication with the father.

In regard to control of group meetings and interaction, there was a general impression that most interaction was regulated by the administration. However, a few mentioned that the group controlled some aspects of the meetings; for instance, "At our meetings, everyone listens and everyone gets the chance to speak. We control that."

Although the group's primary goal was to obtain the possibility of parole for life-sentenced inmates, few participants discussed the group's influence on legislation. As one participant said, "We have no control over the laws. We are fighting for support from those on the street." Of those who did mention legislation, all agreed that the group did not have control. Statements such as these seem to be contradictory to the actions of the group aimed at persuading lawmakers to change the current laws.

When discussing the power in prison, the participants discussed the life-sentenced inmates as a whole, as opposed to only those who were group members. Referring to the influence and status of those with life sentences, many suggested that the life-sentenced inmates were partly responsible for maintaining security within the institution. For example, one participant said, "The staff even say that the lifers keep the peace." Another added, "We keep things cool and calm and keep things in line because we've got to be here."

As some literature (e.g., Carceral, 2000; Hassine, 2004; Paluch, 2004) has pointed out, life-sentenced inmates tend to be particularly concerned with health issues. This was evident during several interviews. One participant claimed, "Health problems are the only

thing we control.” Another participant felt differently: “I used to work out, but then they took that away, too.” Yet another interviewee stressed that his only fear was developing a grave illness while in prison.

Some participants exhibited an internal locus of control, and others an external locus of control. An external locus of control runs counter to the mission of the group. If the group’s fate is out of the hands of its members, then why would they continue to work towards their goal? This issue is explored further in the “responsibility” domain.

Administration issues. Items coded as “administration issues” included any statements referring to the influence or control of prison officials over the Pennsylvania Lifers’ Association. For many participants, this appeared to be a sensitive topic. Many who were serene when discussing other issues became visibly flustered when discussing the role of the administration. In these cases, the content was generally negative. In the following statement, a participant implies that the administration is purposely domineering in order to send a message to the group members:

[We have] control to the extent that the institution and DOC allow. As far as being influential to prisoners and other lifers, we have no control. We try to influence new guys as well as get the population to see that we should all work together to make it better. We are limited by the DOC and the institution. A lot I’ve seen since being a member hasn’t worked. Each administration has made sure to let us know they are in control, like with denying our proposals.

The statements of others suggested that the administration did not deter the group as a result of ill will; to them, the problem was apathy. In these cases, there seemed to be frustration that the administration was not more involved with the group. For example, one participant mentioned that a member of the administration was invited to attend group meetings several times but had not as of yet done so. Others mentioned that

officials were not genuinely concerned with the group's activities and that "they only give us enough to appease us." These participants appeared to be irritated, but did not overtly display strong emotional reactions.

Other informants spoke about the influence of the administration in a matter-of-fact manner. These participants tended to be calm and more composed than the others. Those who spoke in this manner tended to be "old heads," or individuals who had been imprisoned for an extended period. These individuals recognized that many of the goals of the group conflicted with the main goal of the prison: security. For example, one participant indicated, "I don't particularly like it, but it comes with the territory because the institution has its job, and it's my job to obey their control." Another commented, "We try with the resources we have, but you always have opposition with the administration. With the programs we set up, we can be told no because of a breach of security." Most of the statements similar to these reflected the feeling that although the group was limited by the institution, it was not stopped completely. Rules and regulations functioned to make their task more difficult, but not impossible.

A few of the participants brought up incidents that had occurred in previous years. Several alluded to one event in which money may have been stolen by one or more board members. No participants gave details or spoke plainly about it, however. In fact, discussion of the event was either vague or cryptic, which suggested either that the specifics were still unknown or that they did not want to incriminate others, following the prisoner's code as mentioned in other literature (Clemmer, 1940; Goffman, 1961; Paluch, 2004; Slosar, 1978). Several participants indicated that the administration's attitude toward the group had changed following this incident. One said:

We don't have the control we should. We are being held accountable for the past actions and are held back. Our proposals are shot down without real reason. The administration doesn't know what's going on with us. I understand the security and policy reasons, though.

Frustration is evident in this excerpt; however, the interviewee also demonstrates understanding for the actions of the administration. It is clear that the group members, particularly those on the board, did not think they should be punished for the actions of others. It is possible that the administration officials did not view their actions as punishing, but rather as precautionary measures to prevent additional security infringements.

Barriers. The most significant obstacle to preventing the group from accomplishing its goal identified was regulations put in place by the Department of Corrections and the prison administration. All such mentions were coded as "barriers." These were discussed briefly above when compared to those coded as administrative issues. Other difficulties mentioned by participants were problems with the phone system, lack of resources, and difficulty getting their message to the general public.

Transfers. Prisoners can be transferred between Pennsylvania Correctional Institutions for a myriad of reasons. Prison regulations do not allow inmates within different penitentiaries to communicate directly with one another. Consequently, transfers can have a major impact on the group interaction. Most statements regarding the relocation of group members centered on board members. For example, one participant said,

People who have left have been key components. When you extract these from anything, it throws things off. The vice president and secretary were transferred. From a personal standpoint, you can move together with

support. I have confidants, knowledge, and trust. We either have to leave a spot vacant or put others in the place who are less positive.

Others suggested that they had close relationships with a member who had been transferred. In these instances, the participants claimed that they had decreased participation in the activities of the group. Just as some discussed having a bond with individual members, some expressed an overall sense of solidarity within the group. The next section explains this domain.

Solidarity

Prior to this study, there was anecdotal evidence to suggest that group cohesion was a major reason for the continuance of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association. Members of the Pennsylvania Prison Society who spoke with the author before the study explained that group members had built strong relationships with one another. For this reason, it was not surprising that many of those interviewed expressed evidence of group solidarity. Items comprising this domain included those coded as synergy, unity, universality, trust, and group importance. This section explains these labels and provides examples.

Synergy. Numerous participants recognized that through cooperation, the group was able to accomplish more than the individual members would be able to achieve. In many cases, the participants stressed the value of numbers rather than the benefits of interaction. For example:

To be part of any organization means saying, 'I stand for this' and letting your number be counted. It seems that more people are influenced by

numbers than individuals. If every member represents a family and every family represents a constituency, then that can have power.

Another said simply, “There’s strength in numbers.” Statements similar to these suggest that the value of a member is not necessarily his particular characteristics, but rather a statistical significance. In contrast, some recognized the importance of interaction within the group. For example, one said he “[gives] advice to others daily. We come up with ideas together.”

Unity. Content coded as “unity” included statements relating to the primary goal of the group, as well as individual members’ dedication to the group. As one participant said, “Everyone is here for the same reason. Everyone wants the same outcome. We’re all trying to go home.” It is interesting that although some did stress unity within the group, more participants referred to current situations leading to a division. Those who mentioned unity spoke more positively about the group and tended to stress hope.

Universality. All participants involved in the interview portion of the study mentioned that because of their similar experiences and sentences, other members of the group were able to develop a better understanding of the participant than those who were not serving a life sentence. In turn, these participants felt a sense of social support deriving from universality. Yalom (1995) notes in his research that universality is one of eleven therapeutic factors because it helps to decrease intense feelings of loneliness. Because of the consistency of these statements, as well as the stress in the participants’ statements, universality appears to be the primary source of social support and a major factor explaining why group members continued working with the Pennsylvania Lifers’ Association, despite their many setbacks. In addition, Yalom notes that universality often

allows individuals to derive greater benefits from other therapeutic factors. One participant articulated this clearly when he said, “Before, things didn’t add up. I felt alone. I didn’t think anyone understood what I was going through. Now, I understand my situation and I know others do, too. I go about things calm and cool.” By comparing his behavior and feelings before joining the group and after becoming aware that others had similar experiences, one can see the positive effect that this realization has had on his life. In addition, this would likely lead to a strong bond to others in the group, increasing group cohesion and dedication. For those who had been a part of the group already, perhaps universality could function as motivation to continue working on accomplishing the group goal. For example, one said, “When you see others willing to fight and continue on, it’s a good feeling. We’ve been fighting all these years. It’s good to see people involved.” The satisfaction from seeing others in the same situation willing to act could renew one’s own motivation and feelings of hope.

Trust. Items labeled “trust” were ones conforming to Huff, Cooper, and Jones (2002) definition of trust, as “one party's (the trustor) confident expectation that another party (the trustee), on whom the trustor must rely, will help the trustor reach his or her goals in an environment of risk and uncertainty” (p. 25). Because of the emphasis this definition places on goal achievement and the relationship between trust and cohesion, this code best appeared within the solidarity domain. Previous research regarding trust has acknowledged that trust derives from honesty, openness, respect, mutual goals, truthfulness, consistency, loyalty, competence, and expressed support, or so claim Huff, Cooper, and Jones (2002). When discussing trust, most participants seemed confident in their responses. These responses, however, were not consistent. Furthermore, the

responses acknowledged only a few of the factors identified as aspects of trust.

Participants reported trusting all other members, no other members, and some other members.

Those claiming to trust all other members of the group reported a variety of reasons for this trust, all of which corresponded with scholarly literature involving respect, openness, consistency, and mutual goals. Participants also cited reciprocity and the length of relationship as aspects of trust. One person even stated, "With the time you have being here, you've got to trust someone." This suggests that this individual recognized the benefits of trust, but also that in this context, there might not be many options. For some, the trust was conditional. For example, one participant reported trusting all group members on affairs related to the group, but not trusting them in any other situation. Two respondents acknowledged trusting other members of the group as a result of their own actions rather than as a consequence of the environment or behavior of others. For example, one replied, "That's just me. I'm a trusting dude," while another said, "My nature has me trust everyone."

Those who claimed having a lack of trust in other members seemed to distrust not only them, but everyone in the penitentiary. As one participant said, "I've learned not to trust other men in prison." Comments such as this are consistent with the distrust and fear often associated with the prison context (e.g., Lambropoulou, 1999; Wright, 1993).

Those who acknowledged having trust in some individuals, but not others accounted for this on the basis of past experiences with individuals, competency, and length of relationship. Some distrusted those who had played a part in a previous conspiracy and were guilty of theft. Others claimed that some fellow inmates did not

have the skills or intelligence necessary to be trusted. When asked if he trusted other members of the group, one participant replied, "To a certain extent, but not completely. I have to hold the hands of some of them, urge them, and coach them. It shows a lack of discipline and I can't put stock in people like that." Because of the large size of the group, many reported having relatively few interactions with some members and, therefore, were unsure of their behavior and whether these individuals were trustworthy.

Group importance. Many statements concerned the role of the group in one's life, as well as the benefit of the group to the entire prison population. These units were coded as "group importance." Nearly all participants responded that the group was important to their lives. Only those still involved in court proceedings suggested that the group was not crucial to them; however, these individuals nevertheless recognized the importance of the group to others, and the potential benefits to them if their court proceedings did not result as desired.

When discussing the importance of the group, many of the participants alluded to the benefits of membership. These concepts will be discussed in detail in the section dealing with the domain of "costs and benefits." Because participants frequently suggested that being a member of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association has had a positive impact on their individual identity, it can be concluded that the group is also of great importance to many members. Some individuals were able to recognize that the group played an important role in maintaining stability within the prison. One participant referred to this when he said:

It is very important because I know that collective bodies can give one a sense of direction, fulfill that sense of belonging. And I know that success isn't predicated on me alone, but on me cooperating with others. I actually

sense the association as a living entity, almost like a parent. It has great value to many, even the DOC, whether they realize it or not. Wherever you have a large number of people, they will congregate, whether you like it or not. So, to have a group congregate in a positive way, it is of great value. When you keep men in bondage, you have to use a carrot. The DOC uses this organization as a carrot.

Others commented that if the organization were disbanded, that would increase animosity toward the administration and contribute to bitter feelings and emotions that could, in turn lead to an overall deterioration in the prison atmosphere. Those interviewed implied that the group's importance went beyond the benefits to the individual members. It is advantageous to the prison because it occupies the time of the members, instills a sense of hope, encourages positive behavior, and calms those involved. The participants insinuated that this helped to maintain order within the prison and decreased the instance of security violations.

The domain entitled solidarity included codes for statements in which individuals expressed a sense of group cohesion. As discussed, this included testimonials from all individuals involved in the interview process. Given the large number of statements pertaining to group solidarity, it is not surprising that many participants also suggested that group membership had an effect on their identity, the next of the domains to be discussed.

Identity

Communication theory of identity suggests that there are four frames of identity: personal, relational, enacted, and communal identities (Hecht, 1993). The data for the

present study revealed evidence of all four frames. Because these frames are heavily intertwined, it is difficult to examine one without considering the influence of another. For this reason, many items coded as personal, relational, enacted, and communal identity were included in multiple coding groups.

Personal identity. According to Hecht and Jung (2004), personal identity is “an individual's self-concepts or self-images” (p. 266). Participants made a plethora of statements alluding to their self-image. Given the bleak situation these individuals are in and the dark descriptions in much of the scholarly literature, it may be surprising that most conveyed an impression of rather positive self-esteem. For example, one participant said, “I feel pretty good on the whole. I’ve improved myself and grown spiritually, logically, and have gained knowledge. I used to not do much internal inspection. That comes with maturity.” In this statement, as with several others, a comparison was made between the individual’s current actions and those in his past. This often accompanied arguments as to why individuals should be given second chances, or the possibility for parole. Commonly, participants compared themselves with other individuals. In these instances, they mentioned a negative trait of another individual or group and contrasted it with his a positive trait or a positive characteristic of a group in which the person was involved.

When discussing identity in a negative way, participants seemed to talk more about a group of individuals to which they belonged than specifically about themselves. As one participant said, “No one wants to be a lifer. It means you committed homicide. You killed someone and you are here for life.” Addressing characteristics of life-sentenced inmates in general would logically place these judgments on the individual;

however, speaking about a group in general rather than oneself seemed to create a buffer that distanced the person from the negative traits. Many negative statements were phrased in this way, with the included groups being labeled as inmates, life-sentenced inmates, and group members. Further detail is given in the domain entitled “intergroup bias.”

Relational identity. Elements of relational identity evident in the speech of participants included reflections of others’ views, identities deriving from relationships, and identities developed from multiple roles. When discussing others’ views of themselves, many participants stressed positive attributes. For example, one person said, “It’s given me a sense of pride from being one of the older gentlemen in the group. Many younger guys look up to me.” In this statement, the participant is able to ascertain pride from his interactions with other group members. Similarly, one person said. “You know, it’s great to hear a guy say, ‘Hey, old head. What’s up?’ When they call you that, they’re talking about your wisdom and it’s a sign of respect.”

During the demographic portion of the interview, participants were asked if they had children. This was the only time the participants were directly asked about parenthood. However, several participants spoke at length about their role as a parent when answering questions seemingly unrelated. For instance, one participant, when asked to comment on his role as a member of the Pennsylvania Lifers’ Association, responded, “I’m constantly PLA, just like I’m constantly a parent... I’m PLA at all hours, 24/7, just like I’m a parent 24/7.” This participant, as well as others, indicated that his role as a group member and as a parent permeated every action. His roles could not be separated from his being.

There seemed to be a conscious rejection of negative views and labels imposed by others by some participants. For example, one participant acknowledged that he acquired the label “assaultive personality” when first incarcerated. Although he was unable to change this label, he clearly denied possessing that type of personality. This type of rejection was also evident when participants discussed the views of society toward life-sentenced inmates. In fact, several even mentioned that media portrayals of sex offenders and terrorists reflected poorly on them. These individuals denied possessing the negative characteristics of these groups, but felt as though society was transferring the negative stereotypes of these groups onto all inmates.

Enacted identity. Enacted identity is “an individual's performed or expressed identity” (Hecht & Jung, 2004, p. 266). Because the author had minimal interaction with those interviewed, little data concerning enacted identity could be collected. However, it was clear that that group members drew a distinction between old heads, or individuals who had been incarcerated for a long time, and young bucks, individuals who were incarcerated for a short period of time. Old heads were generally viewed as possessing great knowledge acquired throughout their years of incarceration. Although old heads tended to be in touch with their emotions, they made decisions and behaved logically. Young bucks were often characterized as responding readily to emotions, almost as if explosive and irrational. Group members repeatedly mentioned that young bucks did not generally participate in the Pennsylvania Lifers’ Association. Therefore, the author likely did not interview any individuals possessing this label. Participants would be labeled as old heads or would not have a label related to their time in being incarcerated. Those fitting the description of old head tended to speak in a formal, articulate manner. These

individuals were deliberate in their speech. In addition, they displayed actions denoting confidence.

Communal identity. Statements reflecting “communal identity” related to the group, as a whole, rather than individual members. One participant said, “It’s like a brotherhood. It’s an identification thing. No one else can understand us.” This statement stresses the solidarity of the group while differentiating the group members from nonmembers. Another claimed, “The PLA brings some prestige. You aren’t following. You are trying to lead.” In this observation, the speaker is identifying all group members as leaders. He is confirming what another member referred to as “being progressive.”

As several interviewees explained, there is a perception among group members that those who are not members exhibit different characteristics. Recognizing these differences has helped in forming group and individual identities. The next domain further explores the perceived differences between group members and nonmembers.

Intergroup Bias

Intergroup bias is “the systematic tendency to evaluate one's own membership group (the in-group) or its members more favorably than a nonmembership group (the out-group) or its members” (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002, p. 576). Those interviewed discussed this phenomenon in reference to four groups and their disparate outgroups: members of the Pennsylvania Lifers’ Association and nonmembers, life-sentenced inmates and those with minimum sentences, old heads and young bucks, and life-sentenced inmates who have accepted their sentences and those in denial.

Members and nonmembers. It was clear from the participants' statements that they felt strongly that life-sentenced inmates who are members of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association possess positive qualities and strive for change. According to one,

In here, there are those who do, those who want to do, and those who don't. The members of the PLA are the doers that the others look up to. If they disbanded the organization, the doers would fall into the other two categories. It would also bring about increased animosity towards the administration.

In this excerpt, the participant is stressing that the members of the group are attempting to improve their situations, whereas nonmembers are not acting in a beneficial manner. This is reaffirmed by an individual who said, "I care about getting out to see my family. I'm not just someone sitting back, whining and complaining about my situation. I'm trying to make a difference."

Several other participants confessed to having animosity toward those who do not participate. For example,

So few of us care. When are the others going to wake up? The same 15 come to meetings every month. The meetings are in this room. The room should be packed. Guys just sign up to go to the picnic. It's pathetic. I would rather spend my time with those who are progressing and fighting. It's made me more angry towards those who refuse to accept it. They're comfortable. I don't want to be comfortable.

Another said, "They need to learn that nothing will come to you unless you work for it. That's a bad attitude that some of these guys have. I try to be respectful, but it sickens me." A few participants mentioned that they even avoided those who do not act to improve their lives, as the following passage mentions:

Most lifers I'm around, I understand. It's the ones who don't come to the meetings, don't know what's going on, or the ones who speak bad about the organization I don't trust. I try to disassociate with them. That's typical

for prison. You only let so many people know your personal stuff. I only want positive stuff and people around me.

Letters and numbers. Those with life sentences “have letters,” and those with minimum sentences “have numbers.” Many participants claimed that life-sentenced inmates are a primary reason for maintaining security within prisons. For example, one participant said, “Lifers are the stability factor in any prison. We like to see change in our favor. People know that if they disrespect a lifer, they can whack you.” This interviewee attributed the influence of a lifer to his ability to invoke fear. Most participants, however, claimed that lifers tended to be nonviolent and rational. For example, “Old-timers would say they’d rather have a block of lifers than short terms because they are more settled. Lifers are like babysitters.” In this comment, the participant suggested that life-sentenced inmates have a tendency to be more docile than those with numbers. Another said, “The staff kind of understands lifers and think they should lead by example.” Group members and staff alike, then presumably, recognized the distinction between those with letters and numbers.

One participant observed that general society has a tendency to project perceptions of those with minimum sentences onto those with life sentences. In his statement, “People with numbers can hurt lifers’ position. The guys that keep coming back hurt those who are seeking parole eligibility,” he links negative opinions of recidivism for those with numbers and the potential of parole eligibility for those with letters. Even though the statements regarding those with minimum sentences tended to be negative, group members often expressed a desire to be part of the outgroup.

I wish I had a lesser sentence! (laughing) I was walking with two guys who were talking about going home. You want to get away from guys like

this, but pride won't let you. You talk about you getting there, but you know they don't believe you. You can't feel that you won't ever leave. If you give up mentally, stick a fork in you because you're done. If you can see it, you can achieve it. The other guys, they feel bad about it. Like, 'Sorry to talk about this around you, man.' But I tell them not to be sorry, to be happy about their situations. I tell them I hope to get there one day, too. We all go home. Some of us leave walking, some of us on wheels, others in a box. We all leave and that's the only way I can see it. I wish I knew I was going home. It is what it is.

Old heads and young bucks. Generally, young bucks were not members of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association. As one participant said, "The young guys don't think they need it. Hopefully we can shed new light on their thinking." Old heads were also referred to as "elder members." Old heads have high status in the group. They are revered for their extensive knowledge of prison life and legislation, and for their overall strength. As one respondent stated, "With years come wisdom. Older lifers schooled me, and that's why I am how I am." The group also labels individuals who have served 25 years or more as "honorary members." These individuals do not pay dues and are given a certificate to acknowledge their time served, as well as the knowledge that accompanies it.

When discussing the relationship between the old heads and young bucks, several explained that this was changing in a negative direction. For example,

It was like a family. The young guys would listen to the older guys who gave advice. They were looked at like big brothers and uncles. Now the young ones don't and they lose their year to appeal. You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink. It's sad because many burn their bridges.

Another said simply, "A lot of the young guys haven't learned respect."

Acceptance and denial. Several participants mentioned that those convicted of life sentences generally go through three major phases when imprisoned. Drifting, the first phase, occurs when an individual is initially incarcerated. During this phase, the person

feels lost and is not able to grasp his environment. He does not interact freely with other individuals and tends to be guarded. After that, an individual enters the denial phase. During this phase, an individual attempts to fight his case in court and generally speaks to others as if he does not have a life sentence. In addition, it is during this phase that the individual creates problems for himself, other inmates, and the staff. These individuals often acquire the label “hotheaded.” As time passes, life-sentenced inmates gradually enter the final phase: acceptance. In this phase, an individual calms down, logically accepts his sentence, and chooses whether or not to be proactive in changing the laws. Several group members indicated that they felt negative feelings toward those who had not accepted their sentences. Others explained that they, too, had been in denial, but came to accept their lot and expressed sympathy for those who had not.

Surprisingly, not all members of the Pennsylvania Lifers’ Association were in the final stage. When asked what it meant to be called a lifer, one participant replied, “I don’t consider myself that. I’m still fighting.” For this participant, accepting the label “lifer” is to equate himself with someone who has given up. Several individuals stressed that “things” were “happening” in their respective cases. Although it is possible that these individuals could receive a commutation to a lesser sentence, others see them as being in denial.

Consistent with previous literature, the participants tended to speak more positively about the groups in which they considered themselves members. One of the primary ways in which individuals differentiated themselves and others was by extolling their sense of responsibility. The next domain examines this further.

Responsibility

The Pennsylvania Lifer's Association's primary goal is to obtain parole eligibility for life-sentenced inmates. This implies that the group has an ideology of self-responsibility, or an internal locus of control. In other words, it is the responsibility of the group and its members to create change. However, as explained in the earlier discussion of the control domain, many participants did not believe they had any power over their situations. Even those who claimed to be powerless, however, in many instances still believed they had a duty to continue fighting to achieve the group's goal. The responsibility domain includes units pertaining to individual responsibility and group responsibility.

Individual responsibility. Items coded as "individual responsibility" included those relating an individual's felt obligation to the group, as well as non-group related activities. Several, in fact, mentioned specifically that they became members of the group out of a sense of obligation. For example,

There's a feeling of duty. The knowledge was passed to me and it must be held down for the next guy. An older lifer gave me knowledge to help me get by and I must pass it on. I have to choose who to pass it to. The knowledge chain can't be broken.

This participant seemed to feel that because he had acquired useful knowledge from a group member, he must now participate in the group to spread that knowledge. Sharing knowledge by one generation of life-sentenced individuals with another ostensibly is part of the group's heritage.

Others explained individual responsibility in more general terms. For them, working for change and positive outcomes was not only pertinent to the group, but something that permeated their lives. For example, one said,

It means taking responsibility for the crimes you have committed. Otherwise, your time in prison is wasted. Pursue positive endeavors while you are here. Turn the negative in positive. If you're not being truthful and honest with yourself, you should be here.

Another stated, "My incarceration doesn't negate me from my duties. It makes it more challenging. I am ready for forgiveness." In these excerpts, the individuals correlate personal responsibility with growth.

Group responsibility. Some participants spoke about the group's duties within the penitentiary. For example, some explained that the group supports programs that benefit inmates who are not part of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association. Another mentioned that the group had a responsibility to serve as model prisoners for others to look up to. Those who discussed the group's responsibilities stressed the positive aspects of the group for nonmembers. Very few linked the responsibility of the group to its own members. Those who did make this connection spoke of subgroups in which they were not included. For example, an elder member mentioned that the group had an obligation to try to change the laws for younger lifers. No one expressed the view that the group had an obligation to the interviewee.

Nearly all of those interviewed indicated that they felt some type of obligation to the group, but did not connect this to their own personal gain.

Examining the communication that occurs among members can help in

understanding the reasons behind this. The next domain, member relations, explores how the group is influenced by member characteristics and interactions.

Member Relations

Typically, when investigating groups, there is a somewhat clear distinction between member inputs and throughputs. This is the case for the SCI-Huntingdon chapter of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association as well. However, anytime a participant discussed a member input, he paired it with how that input functions in the group. Hence, the domain entitled member relations includes member inputs and throughputs. The subcategories included comprising this domain are diversity, member strengths, respect, friends/associates, and transfers.

Diversity. Although diversity in groups can be initially problematic, it is generally viewed as a positive attribute because it lends itself to creativity and to the sharing of new perspectives (e.g., Hackman, 2002; Milliken & Martins, 1996). However, when talking about diversity, the participants seemed to view it as an obstacle to be overcome. For example, one stressed that the group did an excellent job of bringing out the similarities in individuals who appeared to be different. Individuals recognized that group members differed in respect to race, age, personalities, convictions, time incarcerated, personal values, and religion. The participants, however, were focused on solidarity. It is possible that the expression of diversity could create dissonance among group members who strive to recognize themselves as a uniform, coherent unit. In fact, topics such as

spirituality, which would cause group members to face diversity, reportedly were avoided during group meetings.

Member strengths. The positive attributes of particular individuals were labeled as member strengths. Respondents cited a variety of strengths, including intelligence, knowledge, realness, decision-making skills, insight, advice, leadership skills, drawing, personal motivation, communication links to the general public, self-control, willingness, and creativity. Surprisingly, many felt that their individual strengths were not important to the group. Instead, they were important as people simply because every member is important. Others stated bluntly that they were replaceable. Nearly all board members acknowledged specific strengths they possessed that made them effective in their positions, as well as how these traits functioned in the group.

Respect. Nearly all participants claimed that group members showed signs of respect toward other members. Those who believed that members did not respect one another spoke about subgroups rather than the group as a whole. Participants suggested that members respected one another because of their mutual knowledge, similarities, status, experience, and reciprocity, as well as “it [was] the path of least resistance.” Some was also mentioned that individuals respected others because of their ability to harm. During meetings, respect was evident in active listening, open discussions, showing concern, displays of interest in others’ lives, consistency, and lack of physical conflict.

Friends/associates. Research suggests that participation in support groups can result in improvements in interpersonal relationships (Ferencik, 1990;

Goldsmith, 2004; Mok, 2001; Schindler, 1999). Participants were asked if they had more friends as a result of their membership in the group. In responding, they generally took more time than they did for other questions. Nearly all answered the question directly with a yes or no and then elaborated. A few claimed that all members were friends. Most indicated that they had made friends through the group, but that most members were not friends, only associates. Those who replied that they did not have more friends explained that they had many new associates. In all cases, membership in the group apparently increased the number of individuals with whom members interacted with on a regular basis.

Because the first few participants repeatedly mentioned associates when asked about friends, the author questioned later interviewees concerning what differentiated the two. There was little consistency, but all answers related to interaction. Some of the qualities mentioned two were frequency of communication, respect, trust, realness, total time spent together, enjoyment from companionship, intensity of disclosures, matching personal goals, willingness to help, openness, and common interests. The only conflicting statements made by participants were, "A friend would have my back without hesitation," and "A friend will have your back when you are right, but they will tell you when you are wrong." In one situation, a friend will always stand up for the other, whereas in the other, a friend would inform another friend of his or her fault rather than standing up for him or her. The first speaker seemed to value trust and loyalty as primary factors in friendship. The latter seemed to value openness and reason. For all cases, it seems that "associate" would be a precursor to "friend."

The distinguishing characteristics noted correspond with what one finds in scholarly literature detailing strong and weak social ties. Specifically, Marsden and Campbell (1984) reported the two primary aspects of tie strength, or emotional closeness, to be the amount of time the relationship has existed and the depth of the relationship. Breadth of discussion topics, mutual confiding, duration and frequency of contact, and relationship of individuals were indicators of tie strength in only some contexts. Those with close ties, or those considered friends by the participants, typically have more intimate relationships and engage in more self-disclosure (Granovetter, 1983). In contrast, relationships with weak ties merely provide individuals with additional resources and allow for a greater breadth of division of labor (Granovetter, 1983; Montgomery, 1992). Because strong ties and weak ties tend to entail different types of support, both are important. McPherson and Smith-Lovin, (1987) discovered that homophily is more likely in larger groups and that those with strong ties are typically similar in attitudes, education, age, and sex (McPherson & Smith-Lovin, 1987). Because the size of the SCI-Huntingdon chapter is rather large, it is logical that smaller, dyadic relationships would form. The group is thereby able to provide the benefits of both strong ties and weak ties to its members through the facilitation of friendships and associations.

Transfers. The Pennsylvania Lifers' Association has existed for 34 years. Those in positions of power, as well as those with high status in the group, tend to be individuals who have been members for long periods of time. It is reasonable

to speculate that these individuals are more likely to have an influence on the group.

In Pennsylvania, inmates can be transferred between institutions for a variety of reasons, including good behavior, bad behavior, classification changes, and medical purposes. At SCI-Huntingdon, transfers of life-sentenced inmates are infrequent, but those who are transferred typically have been imprisoned for an extended period of time. Within the past year, three of the group's board members were transferred: the president, vice-president, and secretary. In each case, the group had to decide whether to fill the positions, and if so, with whom. Several interviewees expressed frustration because they had close bonds with those transferred or were displeased that they could no longer perform the duties for which they had been elected. For those who had considered the transferred individuals friends, interaction with the group decreased. In contrast, one participant felt that such occurrences emphasized the flexibility of the group through member support and cooperation.

The relationships of group members were also discussed briefly when participants discussed their levels of contentment with the group. The following section explores the domain entitled "group satisfaction."

Group Satisfaction

When discussing levels of satisfaction with the group, the participants mentioned how well the group works together and compared and contrasted members of the newly constituted board with previous board members. Each is described below.

Working together. Items relating to the group members' successful or unsuccessful interaction with one another were designated as "working together." In most cases, the participants responded specifically about the board members. Overall, the comments were very positive. The participants acknowledged trusting the board members, having confidence, and receiving needed information from them. They claimed that the board was more serious now and had implemented more programs. Board members explained that they worked well together by coming up with ideas, passing along information, thinking critically, developing plans, evaluating solutions, and contacting those in the public. Both board members and non-board members felt that they could work together more effectively if they had more freedom from the administration.

Compared with the past. When explaining their satisfaction with the board, several participants compared the current board members with those of a previous board. As explained in the discussion of the control domain, a few participants alluded to a situation in which theft may have taken place in the board. Participants spoke highly of the new board and were pleased with the results of the last election. By emphasizing the negative aspects of the previous board, they were able to contrast more clearly the new board and to explain how things have changed. For example, one participant said, "In the

past, you had people talking about corruption. Now there isn't rumors. There aren't the shakedowns. We see more happening and more people coming in."

Several participants mentioned that they hoped the administration would begin to notice the changes in the group and that the group could regain its trust. These group members implied that if the administration gave the group more freedom, the group would be able to increase its benefits to its members and others in the prison population. The next domain, entitled costs and benefits, examines the perceived advantages and disadvantages of membership.

Costs and Benefits

Rational choice theory holds that individuals make purposeful decisions by evaluating the likely consequences of alternatives (Turner, 1991). *Social exchange theory* (Cook & Emerson, 1978) builds on *rational choice theory* in positing that individuals will participate in activities, or exchanges, with others if they perceive that the benefits of the exchange will outweigh the costs. Applying the logic of *social exchange theory* and *rational choice theory* to the interaction among Pennsylvania Lifers' Association members, those most likely continue to participate in activities of the group are the ones who come to perceive that the benefits of membership outweigh the costs. During the interviews, participants were asked specifically about some of the costs and benefits of membership as documented in related literature (e.g., Greenstein & Breitbart, 2000; Smokowski et al., 2001). Among the specific topics were information sharing, relational experiences, spirituality, social support, problem-solving, anger, depression, stress, daily

difficulties, self-efficacy, loneliness, forgiveness, self-esteem, time, monetary expenses, staff relations, personal (dis)satisfaction, skills, and maturity. In addition, some members stated that group membership acted to fill a hole in their lives. These units were coded as emptiness.

Information sharing. Many participants suggested that information concerning the position of life-sentenced inmates and new legislation was difficult to obtain in prison. All participants stated that the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association was beneficial because it allowed the members to exchange information with one another.

For most interviewees, information from the group was desired because it helped them stay current. Some individuals mentioned that the group aided them in learning about case laws, court rulings, politicians' positions, and legislation. Many indicated that they did not feel they would be able to acquire any of this type of information without the group. A few members discussed their relationships with those in the general public. They play a valuable role because they function as boundary spanners receiving information from the outside and bringing it to the attention of the group. The participants also expressed satisfaction with the speed at which the board was able to disseminate information to those in the cell blocks.

A few participants noted that they experienced a great deal of uncertainty after their initial incarceration. For them, the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association was beneficial because it helped them obtain information which may have functioned to alleviate some of the stress and fear frequently associated with imprisonment. Information may have aided the coping processes of these participants.

Several participants mentioned being misinformed about various aspects of their cases. Some were told a life sentence had a minimum sentence; others thought they had longer than one year to appeal their sentences or were not aware when the laws regarding appeal periods changed. In these situations, not having the necessary information was detrimental. These individuals stressed that they wanted to contact other lifers to let them know about their own experiences in an effort to help others avoid making similar mistakes.

Relational experiences. Statements pertaining to changes in one's relationships, both inside and outside prison, were coded as relational experiences. During incarceration, it is common for the relationships one has with those in free society to suffer and often deteriorate completely (Pomeroy et al., 2000). Participants were asked about their relationships with family and friends on the outside. Responses indicated that individuals' relationships varied from very strong ties to having no contact with family and friends. Group membership did not seem to have much impact on these relationships. However, some individuals reported that group membership helped them contact other individuals outside prison, such as lawyers and activist groups. In addition, by conveying information to the group about the role of family and friends in the battle to obtain parole eligibility, the participants were better able to instruct their family and friends concerning what they could do to help.

Previous scholarship has suggested that the development of new relationships in prison can be difficult because of fear and distrust (Lambropoulou, 1999; Wright, 1993). Many participants reported that since they had become members of the group, they developed new friendships. All reported having increased the number of their associates.

One participant said, “The PLA is significant to me because it affords me the opportunity to interact with others, to make friends, and meet people. It has great social value.”

Another commented simply, “The group works to network.” Because all participants emphasized the importance of information management, it seems clear that networking had a substantial role in the group as well.

Spirituality. As discussed in respect to the member relations domain, participants reported that they did not discuss spirituality during meetings primarily because of diversity. Two mentioned that spiritual-related matters might be discussed briefly if it they were task-related, for example, if the group were donating money to a religious organization. In such cases, the information discussed would be factual, not about spirituality as such. Participants indicated that avoiding discussion of spiritual matters was a way of demonstrating respect. This reduced conflict and helped members to focus on the task.

Although many participants reported growing spiritually while members of the Pennsylvania Lifers’ Association, they generally commented that it was unrelated to group membership. Rather, it seems that for many individuals, spirituality helped them make peace in their lives so that they could accept the meaning of a life sentence. Therefore, it is likely that spirituality was not a benefit of group membership, but instead a factor that may have led to group membership.

The only comments indicating that an individual’s spirituality had changed were those in which the skills acquired through the Pennsylvania Lifers’ Association permeated other aspects of one’s life. For example, two participants mentioned that they had become more direct in all of their communication since joining the group. This

reportedly led these individuals to be more direct about their spirituality as well. For example, one participant said, "I am more direct and that's an outcome of the experience with the PLA. The process with the PLA is very straightforward. The 'bottom line' has been brought into the spiritual arena." Another commented, "I've always been spiritual rather than religious. My spirituality has guided me. Since I've been here with the PLA, I've taken more time to be introspective to learn my spirit."

A few participants claimed that they were not spiritual. In these cases, they reportedly found inspiration from other sources, primarily through other people. For example, one participant said, "I use others as motivation rather than religion. Putting a smile on someone else's face, that's my motivation." Similar to those who claimed that spirituality aided in their coping processes, these individuals have succeeded in finding an outside source to help them manage difficult situations. For these individuals, increased communication with friends and associates through the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association could be highly beneficial because it provided for a greater number of sources of motivation.

Social support. Many participants suggested that group membership served to provide social support that they were unable to find in other settings. Weiss (1974) has noted six functions of social support in relationships. These include guidance, reliable alliance, reassurance of worth, attachment, social integration, expressions reflecting one's feeling of belonging to the group, and opportunity for nurturance.

As mentioned in discussing the previous code, members received support from other members by sharing information and opinions. Weiss (1974) calls this type of support "guidance." The group presumably helped to open lines of communication for

those in need of help and resources that can enable them to improve certain aspects of their lives. This includes both legal help and aid with personal problems.

Weiss also identified “reliable alliance,” or the social support that comes about when one feels that one can depend on another in times of need. Some said that they could rely on others to listen, share their experiences, or be prepared to physically help them in times of need. Reassurance of worth was evident when participants noted that others in the group personally recognized the work or presence of other group members. One participant exemplified this in saying, “Everyone looks forward to me coming. I know because they make the effort to say things like, ‘Hey, ___ is here’ or ‘Good, ___ was able to make it.’”

Attachment refers to the emotional closeness members feel toward one another. Many participants named one or two individuals with whom they are particularly close. In most of these situations, the individuals had interaction outside the group. For example, several individuals worked together, as well as interacted during meetings.

Social integration, or the feeling of belonging to the group, was evident in the comments of several members. For many, this particular group fulfilled the need to belong more than other groups did because of the salience of its primary goal in their personal lives. In addition, some observed that others showed concern, which contributed to their feelings of belonging.

The opportunity for nurturance refers to the ability of one to provide support to another person or having another person rely upon one. This was evident particularly among elder participants. These individuals acknowledged that other group members relied on them for advice, information, and the development of problem-solving skills.

In addition to Weiss's (1974) categories, universality was also repeatedly mentioned as a way in which the group provided social support to its members. Having the ability to see the others who had similar experiences, as well as interaction with them, provided support. Participants commented, "Information here isn't found in other groups," "No one else can understand us," and, "Other groups didn't focus on our situation." For these individuals, the group's primary goal was clearly relevant to their lives. It served to bond members by focusing on the future and indirectly acknowledged the similar pasts of the participants that placed them in the current situation.

Problem-solving. This code included all statements regarding individuals' problem-solving skills as related to the group. Nearly all members reported having improved in their problem-solving abilities as a result of participation in group meetings. The most common response by participants was that they had become more analytical in their problem-solving. Many acknowledged that before membership, they reacted quickly and emotionally. Now, they claim to evaluate the causes and consequences of problems they encounter and their reactions to them. For example, one said, "I've matured by being around other lifers. My wisdom has grown. Time is something we all have, so I take my time and think things through."

Several also claimed that they previously tended to internalize a problem. After becoming a member, they were more likely to seek advice or alternative perspectives from others. Some attributed this to having a greater social network, whereas others felt this was a result of watching how older, respected members dealt with problems during meetings.

A few participants mentioned that group membership has changed the way in which they view problems. For example, some members mentioned that the group helped them focus more on the problem. Others claimed that by being part of a group with such an important goal, they had begun to realize that some other problems were trivial in comparison to the ones the group was attempting to resolve. Situations that may have seemed problematic previously, as a result, ceased to be of concern to these individuals.

Anger. Similar to problem-solving, many participants mentioned that participation in the group helped them deal with anger in a positive way. They reported that when angry, they were able to take time to think through the issues. This was reportedly a result of programs sponsored by the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association, such as the Alternatives to Violence Program, as well as the personal relationships formed as a result of membership in the group. In addition, participants also said that being part of a collective helped them to keep issues in perspective and minimize anger producing stimuli.

Depression. When asked about depression, several participants immediately said that it was not a problem for them. For others, depression was relieved either by the work of the group or by other members. Several participants mentioned that taking part in group activities kept them occupied so that they did not have time to think about topics that would make them sad. For example, one participant said,

You have to always look on the bright side. Many people here see this as depressing, demoralizing, even demasculating, and this is why I stay involved. To stay positive, it is an upward battle, but it's something to look forward to every day.

This individual justified the costs of involvement by claiming that the results helped him to think positively and counteract potential negative consequences. Others mentioned that

if they experienced depression, working on group-related projects helped keep them occupied until the depression passed.

Some participants mentioned talking to other group members and that this helped them cope. In fact, several cited specific individuals who had served as confidants or mentors during episodes of depression. Knowing that others have been through similar experiences presumably helped many of the individuals through difficult moments.

Two individuals mentioned that by accepting responsibility, they were able to decrease their depression. For example, one said that he thought about the victim and his family when depressed, which places his sadness into perspective. Another stated that when he accepted the responsibility, “the burden was lifted.” Although most participants did not discuss restorative justice, the group had sponsored these programs in the past. It is possible that through them, individuals who take responsibility for their actions could experience decreases in feelings of depression.

Stress. Surprisingly, many participants said they did not experience stress. This is inconsistent with previous research regarding prison life (e.g., Gallie, 2000; Pomeroy et al., 2000). Many participants responded that they did not have stress because they had little responsibility in prison. For example, their days are planned thoroughly by the staff. Therefore, they had few decisions to make. Others reported that they experienced a great deal of stress. For some, the group apparently aided in relieving stress; for others, the group reportedly created additional stress.

As discussed previously, participants reported having a greater number of friends or acquaintances because of membership. For one individual, believing others would

“have my back” if physically threatened helps relieve stress. For others, again, the perception of universality seemed to decrease stress.

One individual claimed that participation in the group functioned to increase stress in his life. For this person, “constant reminders that you can be shut down” weighed heavy on his mind. In addition, the time he spent on projects for the group intruded the time he would spend contacting his family.

Daily difficulties. Most participants indicated that they had learned to deal with many of the daily difficulties of prison life before becoming a member of the group. Those who stated that the group helped them with daily difficulties said that the group helped them be more open in communicating about problems, as well as more likely to seek others’ help, and helped them build trusting and dependable relationships with others. Participants again mentioned that knowing others were in the same situation better enabled them to cope.

Self-efficacy. Items coded as self-efficacy focused on the group’s effect on one’s perception of control over his life. Similar to items included in daily difficulties, most participants said they had gained control over their lives before becoming a member of the group. In fact, several responded that they would not be valuable members of the group had they not gained control. This is particularly interesting because it contradicts the claims made by several interviewees, who stated that the administration controls everything or that “control over our own lives is an illusion.”

Loneliness. When asked about loneliness, nearly all participants quickly showed signs of sadness. This was clearly a sensitive topic for many participants. Some responded directly and with certainty. For example, one said, “I look reality in the face. I

know I would not be experiencing loneliness had I not done this.” Others explained their experiences by means of narrative. Those who employed anecdotes tended to concentrate on one or two specific people whom they missed from before their incarceration. These individuals included mothers, children, grandchildren, friends, and significant others.

One participant alleged that loneliness was not an issue for him. Another claimed,

I feel lonely being so far from my family and my grandchildren... [The PLA] helps me to stay active. Lifers feel lonely locked in their cells by themselves. If some say they don't, they're lying. Like with Mother's Day yesterday, I felt bad because I couldn't be with my mom and hug her.

This individual clearly believed that all life-sentenced inmates experience loneliness. He and others suggested that knowing others experienced this pain made it easier to cope. In addition, staying active in the group helped occupy time so that one would not dwell on loneliness.

Forgiveness. Some participants reported changes in both their ability to forgive others, as well as themselves as a result of group membership. Some suggested that the group had helped them realize that if they are not working toward making their lives positive, then they were wasting their lives. For these individuals, holding a grudge or not forgiving another person only created further harm. Forgiving others was a means of making their lives more meaningful. For others, the group reportedly helped them to understand other people. As one participant said, “When you understand people, you are better able to forgive them.” Two participants mentioned that since their incarceration, they had had family members murdered. In these cases, both said they had forgiven the perpetrator. Specifically, one said the following:

When my uncle was killed, I was locked up with the guy who did it. He was afraid I was going to hurt him. I told his friends to tell him to go about his business. My

uncle was in that lifestyle. I told my mom that she needs to forgive others if she wants forgiveness for her son. I use scripture and ask God for help.

Most participants acknowledged having a more difficult time forgiving themselves than others. Several mentioned that their spirituality dictated forgiveness but that the group did not help. One said seeing that others in the group had made the same mistakes in their pasts helped them come to terms with their own actions. Another observed that forgiving oneself

came about through a total rethinking of what I'd become. The PLA experience has helped by way of practical application. It helps to take from the group situation and superimpose it on something else. I guess using one thing to understand another.

For this individual, membership in the group helped him become introspective and led him eventually to forgive himself. For this individual, group membership had an indirect effect on forgiveness.

Self-esteem. Many participants alluded to improvements in their perceptions of self as a result of group membership. Some spoke about the changes in their level of self-esteem in very general terms; others referred to specific feelings about themselves that had changed. For example, one person commented, "I'm doing something positive. Anything positive should make you feel better." For this participant, actions in the group were a direct reflection of his feelings toward self. One interviewee noted specifically how his self-esteem has changed: "I trust myself now. I give myself a chance. I only have to prove things to myself. I love myself. I trust myself. I know myself." In line with this comment, nearly half of those interviewed commented that they presently loved themselves.

Others claimed that group membership had helped them mature spiritually psychologically, and that knowing this led to more positive feelings about themselves. One participant came to respect himself because of his participation with a group that focused on an important goal. Another participant said that the group has helped him develop a positive view of everything, including himself, and felt that membership had “confirmed my new sense of value I was developing.”

Time. An obvious cost associated with membership in any group or organization is time. For some group members, the time spent working on group-related tasks was something about which they commented. Participants acknowledged spending free time typing proposals, attending meetings, talking with other group members, preparing and running fundraisers, and writing letters. The amount of time spent on these tasks varied between very small amounts of time, such as an hour or two weekly, to “5 days a week, 8 hours a day.” Participants also claimed that the time they spent on the group could intrude on either time spent with family or participating in other programs.

Possibly the most interesting finding relating to this cost was the justification participants mentioned when discussing time. Almost all participants who indicated dedicating time to group activities followed their statements with a disclaimer to the effect that the amount of time was necessary and was not viewed as a detriment. For example, one said, “The time I spend is nothing. It doesn’t matter.” As discussed in respect to the responsibility domain, many members feel a sense of duty which motivates them to participate in group activities. It is possible that this responsibility in the minds of the interviewees also minimized the perception of cost as related to time.

Although time is traditionally viewed as a limited commodity, it was ample for some prisoners. For these individuals, it was implied that the amount of time spent on group-related activities was actually a benefit because, as one noted, “it gives you something to do, something to think about.” For these individuals, staying busy with the Pennsylvania Lifers’ Association helped in dealing with boredom. In addition, occupying time with positive activities limited the amount of time one could devote to pondering or participating in negative activities. One participant mentioned that the group would like to have more time to meet because the members did not feel they could accomplish everything they would like during meetings.

Monetary expenses. Similar to time costs, participants suggested that membership dues were not significant. Members who were not honorary members, or those incarcerated for more than 25 years, paid annual dues of \$7. Members did not acknowledge this as a cost unless asked specifically about dues. When they did, again there was a disclaimer, such as “but they are a great asset to our journey. They use them to make copies so that everyone knows what’s happening and to buy supplies.”

Staff relations. As discussed in relation to the control domain, many group members were concerned about their relationships with prison staff. Some felt that membership in the group enhanced these relationships; others identified membership as detrimental to them. Many participants acknowledged that the relationship between those with life sentences and staff members was different from that of staff and those with minimum sentences. As mentioned previously, many of the interviewees felt that the staff had expectations that life-sentenced individuals would behave according to prison regulations. For this reason, some mentioned that they felt as though they were given

more respect by staff members. Others mentioned that staff knew that group members were aware of the prison guidelines for both prisoners and employees, and therefore, would not try to behave outside the rules when interacting with life-sentenced inmates.

Others felt as though group membership created problems. These interviewees suggested that participation in the group placed them under “institutional radar.” For example, some members who had been outspoken were transferred to other institutions. Others had had shakedowns, or cell searches. Although these could not be directly linked to group membership, participants implied that these activities were suspicious and felt that they were associated. As one participant said bluntly, “If you complain about things, it’s a problem.”

Personal (dis)satisfaction. Regardless of whether individuals joined for their own benefit or for that of the group, many reportedly felt a sense of enjoyment from participation. Some mentioned taking pleasure in building or using their personal talents, such as writing, creativity, or drawing. Others said that helping others brought them joy. For some members, seeing others become interested in and fighting for the same goal renewed their hope and made them feel better about life overall. Others mentioned that the group was a source of pride, and that this was enjoyable. However, such feelings were not consistent throughout the group. In fact, some said there was no sense of pride, only duty.

Others mentioned that group membership was not enjoyable and created hardships for them. For example, one person said that the group was a source of frustration in his life. For this individual, the group focused on helping all members but

did not feel as though many members were competent or dedicated. However, this was not representative of the general feeling expressed by members.

Skills. Many participants acknowledged that participation with the group increased member competence. For example, according to one participant, his role had changed in the group and this had taught him

to be prepared, leadership skills, social skills, and how to be articulate. It taught me to be stern and giving at the same time. I am focal for the first time. I am being geared to carry weight in the future.

Others suggested that group membership helped particular individuals improve their reading abilities and the ability to stay focused on important topics. One participant suggested that, "It helps in ways I can't see. Maybe others would see changes." He seemed confident that the group had helped him build skills, but he was unable to identify which ones or how specifically.

Maturity. All participants claimed that they had matured substantially since the time of their initial incarceration. Some claimed that they had matured before joining the group and that maturity is what has made them valuable members. Others said that group membership has helped them grow. For those helped by membership in the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association, personal growth was reportedly a result of being around others who had accepted their sentences and had dealt with it in a constructive manner. Elder members served as a source of inspiration for the growth of younger individuals. However, as one participant pointed out, "The group provides support, but it's up to the individual to make change in his life." As this person observed, group membership could aid one in various ways, but it was the responsibility of the individual to act positively.

Emptiness. One way in which the author attempted to acquire information about the group's importance was to ask the participants to explain how their lives would be affected if the group were to stop meeting. One idea repeated by participants was the concept of a "hole" in respondents' lives. The group apparently served to fill a void in the lives of some members. This is evident in the one participant's statement: "Everything would seem empty and not worth it anymore. It's our support group. It's all we have. It's our support group. We can talk about everything. Mentally, it would be very unhealthy." Another said, "I feel incomplete if I don't go."

Although there was quite a bit of testimony regarding the positive and negative aspects of group membership, many responses were not consistent from member to member. In addition, many participants did not address topics unless asked specifically about them. Before participants were asked about specific costs and benefits, they were asked to list any costs and benefits they could think of without prompt. Two individuals replied that the group had not helped them at all, and 12 said that group membership had no costs.

In addition to discussing the past and present group activities, members also explained their hopes and expectations for the future. The following section involves comment related to these general themes.

Future

When discussing the future of the group, as well as their own future, participants talked about hope, membership rates, and death. In respect to these topics, many

participants openly conveyed emotion. Several mentioned that they lived “one day at a time,” which appeared to be a sign that life-sentenced inmates were particularly concerned, and perhaps worried, with their futures.

Hope. All participants indicated whether or not they believed the laws regarding parole eligibility for life-sentenced inmates would change. The responses were mixed. Interestingly, even participants who agreed offered a variety of reasons for their hope, or lack thereof.

Some participants suggested that hope is necessary in all elements of life. For these individuals, hope was not exclusively tied to the group’s goal, nor did the group’s goal inspire a great deal of hope. Others expressed the view that hope was “all we have.” It seems as though this type of hope was the result of a sense of desperation. One participant said,

If PLA stopped, there’d be a big gap. We’ve been doing it for a while. It’s therapeutic. It’s something to do, something to look forward to. You are part of the living, being progressive rather than just waiting on a natural death sentence. Why do all this good stuff? Because we need hope. There is no commutation. All these years you stayed in physical condition, and for what? You need hope to continue. I understand why some of these guys use drugs. They lost hope. They stopped trying to help each other. They became savage and stopped helping. The system will turn you savage. If you take all hope away from a man, what does he have left? Nothing. Lifers are the ones we look to for this, that, and the other. But, they keep knocking us in the head. We keep things cool and calm and keep things in line because we’ve got to be here. We have nothing to lose, so what keeps us from becoming savage? Hope.

The person making this stated felt that hope was necessary for the psychological well-being of individuals. In fact, he saw hope as partly responsible for the positive behavior of life-sentenced individuals. Another said, “I try to keep the light lit at the end of the

tunnel. I'm not going to let that light die out." For these individuals, clinging on to hope for a better future was something they viewed positively, and for some, it was essential.

A few participants suggested that legislation would change as a result of factors unrelated to the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association. For example, several said that a spiritual being may have an effect. Others cited the economy, health issues, and politics. Interestingly, these three factors were also surfaced as reasons for why some felt the laws would not change.

Several participants suggested that the legislation may change in the future, but that it would not have an effect on their cases. For example, a few said they felt that Senate Resolution 149 would never be retroactive. Others said they would pass away before the laws changed. In each case, the individuals indicated that they still would like to see the laws change for those in similar situations in the future, as reflected in the following excerpt:

I think when they give you life, it means life. I'd love to see it change, but I don't think it will in my lifetime. It doesn't discredit the PLA, I love them and what they do. It just won't happen in my lifetime. I'd love to see it for my younger brother.

Other individuals did not discuss hope in a positive manner. In fact, these individuals noted that they consciously tried to limit hope in an effort to protect themselves. For example, one said, "I try not to rely too much that can be changed tomorrow. When Mark Single was running, I saw guys' hearts break when he lost. The same thing with Rendell. Guys are quick to grab hope out of desperation. I don't want to do that." Another said, "I thought that by the time I had 20 years in, it would have changed. It's eight years past that." Others mentioned that they felt Senate Resolution

149 was creating false hope in the minds of some inmates and that these individuals would be hurt badly if it failed.

Membership rates. Several participants commented on the future participation in the group. Of those, nearly all suggested that the group would experience increased membership and participation in the future. Reasons for this included confidence in the current board, increases in life sentences, current events related to life-sentenced inmates, and increased recruitment. All others who discussed this topic said that participation would remain the same. These individuals showed disgust for the apathy of others in similar situations. Although many chapters of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association were being disbanded throughout the state, no participants suggested that the SCI-Huntingdon chapter might not exist in the future.

Death. As discussed in Chapter 1, literature regarding life-sentenced inmates suggests that these individuals have a deep concern for their health (Carceral, 2000; Hassine, 2004; Paluch, 2004). During the interviews, no questions concerning death were raised; however death was mentioned repeatedly by participants, consistent with findings reported in the literature. Some mentioned nonchalantly that they would die in prison. Others discussed fear of medical treatment near or at the time of death. One individual even explained the manner in which he would like to die. Another participant said that a life-sentenced individual was "a walking dead man. If you are not careful with your mind, you are a walking, dangerous dead man."

Survey Data

Confirmatory factor analysis did not yield the structure Russell and Cutrona's (1987) Social Provisions Scale revealed in other research. As a result, the author conducted an exploratory factor analysis to determine how the items loaded, without a priori assumptions concerning the factor structure. In previous studies, factor analysis revealed six dimensions: attachment, social integration, reassurance of worth, reliable alliance, guidance, and opportunity for nurturance. These were the same six dimensions Weiss (1974) identified as being functions of social relationships. The data collected from life-sentenced inmates housed in Pennsylvania State Correctional Institutions suggested that social support was uni-dimensional for this population.

The factor structure, as seen in Table 3, initially appears as though four separate dimensions of social support might exist. However, closer examination of the data revealed different findings. Items were identified as loading on a factor if their values on the component matrix were greater than .60 for one component, and not greater than .40 for any other component. Applying this rule, 21 of the 24 items loaded on the first factor, with one on the second, one on the third, and none on the fourth factor. Table 4 shows their eigenvalues, percentage of variance accounted for, and cumulative percentage of variance accounted for. All factors with an eigenvalue of less than one were dropped from analysis in accordance with Kaiser criterion. It is evident that the eigenvalue of the first factor is much higher than that of the other three, and it accounted for 40.22% of the total variance. These data indicate a one factor solution and a uni-dimensional scale.

Because 21 of the 24 items loaded on a single factor, it was important to assess the reliability for a uni-dimensional scale as a general measure of social support rather than as a six dimensional measure. Specifically, the items revealed a Cronbach's alpha of .93. Removing the three items that did not load on the first factor did not alter the Cronbach's alpha.

Table 3: Component Matrix

Item	Component			
	1	2	3	4
There are people I can depend on to help me if I really need it.	.65	-.26	-.22	.02
I feel that I do not have close personal relationships with other people.*	.63	-.16	.06	.21
There is no one I can turn to for guidance in times of stress.*	.64	-.19	-.02	.29
There are people who depend on me for help.	.64	.36	-.25	-.03
There are people who enjoy the same social activities I do.	.48	.28	.37	-.43
Other people do not view me as competent.*	.39	.17	.61	.30
I feel personally responsible for the well-being of another person.	.41	.58	-.36	.24
I feel part of a group of people who share my attitudes and beliefs.	.60	.15	.15	-.21
I do not think other people respect my skills and abilities.*	.51	.12	.33	.09
If something went wrong, no one would come to my assistance.*	.64	-.08	.18	.31
I have close relationships that provide me with a sense of emotional security and well-being.	.77	-.23	-.12	.01
There is someone I could talk to about important decisions in my life.	.78	-.31	-.08	-.08
I have relationships where my competence and skills are recognized.	.64	.07	.23	-.16
There is no one who shares my interests and concerns. *	.63	.03	.21	.03
There is no one who really relies on me for their well-being.*	.62	.37	-.31	.14
There is a trustworthy person I could turn to for advice if I were having problems.	.68	-.20	-.05	-.24
I feel a strong emotional bond with at least one other person.	.72	-.09	-.13	-.33
There is no one I can really depend on for aid if I really need it.*	.73	-.23	-.07	.12
There is no one I feel comfortable talking about problems with. *	.69	-.20	.08	.20
There are people who admire my talents and abilities.	.62	.31	-.05	-.26
I lack a feeling of intimacy with another person.*	.56	-.15	.01	-.24
There is no one who likes to do the things I do.*	.59	.21	.25	.04
There are people I can count on in an emergency.	.70	-.23	-.19	-.04
No one needs me to care for them.*	.66	.29	-.26	.10

* These items were reverse coded so that high scores denoted positive social support.

Table 4: Total Variance Explained

Initial Eigenvalues

Component	Total	Percentage of Variance Accounted for	Cumulative Percentage Accounted for
1	9.65	40.22	40.22
2	1.49	6.19	46.40
3	1.32	5.51	51.91
4	1.02	4.25	56.16

Summary

This chapter has presented the results of the data analyses for the observational, interview, and survey data acquired. It detailed social support activities evident from observations of the weekly board meetings of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association. The interview data fell into 11 domains: the decision to become a member, goals, control, solidarity, identity, intergroup bias, responsibility, member relations, group satisfaction, costs and benefits, and future. Each domain and the codes included were explained. The survey data did not meet the a priori assumptions concerning the dimensions of social support that emerged from the review of research involving social support. Instead of the items loading on six factors as they had in previous studies, the data suggested that for this population of interest, social support may be a uni-dimensional construct. The next chapter reveals the answers the study provided for the research questions addressed and explores the implications of the data for future research, as well as the importance of these findings to current knowledge of social support.

Chapter 4

Discussion

This chapter provides an overall discussion of the findings, including reviews of the rationale for the study, research questions, limitations, implications for future research, implications for practice, and presents a summary and the conclusions the study appears to support.

Rationale for the Study

As discussed in Chapter 1, incarceration rates in the United States have been increasing approximately 3.5% annually (Prison statistics, 2005). This has resulted in over 2 million inmates in state and federal penitentiaries (Ehrmann, 2002; Erger & Beger, 2002; Fazel et al., 2002; Rapposelli et al., 2002). As the imprisoned population grows, the need to explore interactions within this population becomes more important because, as explained in pertinent literature, the impact of imprisonment affects not only inmates, but also their loved ones and society as a whole.

Pennsylvania is one of only six states that does not have parole eligibility for life-sentenced inmates. Pennsylvania, as well as a few other states, has an active Lifers' Association. Members of this group work to change the legislation concerning life-sentenced inmates, as well as to provide support to one another, loved ones, and outside organizations. Despite pressure from the administration and repeated failed attempts at the group's primary goal, the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association has four active chapters

that have been characterized as having loyal participation, dedication, and strong cohesion.

Most research involving groups in the prison context has concentrated on the effectiveness of psychotherapy groups. The communication processes and possible outcomes of social support groups have been neglected (e.g., Dixon, 2000; Morgan et al., 1999). Especially little is known concerning if and how social support is communicated in groups run by inmates rather than professionals. Furthermore, research dealing with prison programs in the field of Criminology tends to focus on recidivism rates and ignore the communication component of such programs (e.g., Duguid & Pawson, 1998; Jablecki, 2000; Penny, 2000). Those with natural life sentences would not be included in this research. In fact, the only literature detailing the experiences of life-sentenced inmates that could be found involved first person accounts written by life-sentenced inmates (e.g., Hassine, 2004; Paluch, 2004). This dissertation was designed to fill these knowledge gaps and, thereby, add more generally to an understanding of the communication of social support within this population.

Findings

This study addressed three research questions. They were guided the manner in which data were collected and analyzed. The questions were as follows:

RQ₁: How do members of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association communicate social support to one another during regular meetings?

RQ₂: How do members of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association describe their experiences with the group?

RQ₃: Does the structure of social support in groups differ between those in free society and life-sentenced inmates?

To answer the first question, the investigator used observational methods to collect data from 11 weekly board meetings of the SCI-Huntingdon chapter of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association. The second question was explored by means of interviews with 20 group members. Data for the final question were collected via a survey distributed to life-sentenced individuals at three of the four institutions with active chapters of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association.

In developing the methods used to explore Research Question 1, the investigator relied on testimonials from individuals who had been present at previous board meetings of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association at SCI-Rockiew and SCI-Huntingdon. Anecdotal evidence from these individuals suggested that the group devoted a great deal of time to social support functions. For this reason, the author thought that observations of the group would be an appropriate method for studying how social support is communicated among the members. However, although observations of the board meetings revealed various types of social support, the quantity and time allocated to social support behaviors were less than expected. Most interaction during the meetings served primarily task-related functions. The meetings consisted of a business portion and general discussion component in all cases.

Observations of the board yielded evidence of 8 of Yalom's (1995) 11 primary factors of social support: instillation of hope, universality, imparting information,

altruism, the corrective recapitulation of the primary family group, imitative behavior, development of socializing techniques, and group cohesiveness, as well as reassurance of worth. Evidence of catharsis, existential factors, and interpersonal learning were not uncovered. This is not surprising, in that Kurtz (1997) noted that these factors generally do not surface without the assistance of a trained professional. Kurtz also suggested that the recapitulation of the primary family group and the development of socializing techniques are rare in social support groups. During the group meetings, some behavior was indicative of these factors; however, as noted in the analysis, these findings were not conclusive. It was unclear whether the behaviors noted fulfilled these functions or if they served functions unknown by the author.

The observations suggested that Yalom's (1995) model of the therapeutic experience, although accounting for a great deal of communicated social support, does not explain in full the experiences of the board members. This model would be more complete with the addition of Weiss's (1974) concept of reassurance of worth. In fact, reassurance of worth may be a primary factor for incarcerated individuals because they frequently have experienced deterioration in their primary relationships, harmful effects from labels having negative connotations, decreased responsibility, and regret for previous actions.

It is important to note that although the observable quantity of social support behavior present in board meetings was minimal, this does not necessarily mean that the group does not function to provide social support for the participants. Although interview data were collected in an effort to explore Research Question 2, the participants' responses collected from directed interviews aided a great deal in the analysis of the

observation data. As Goldsmith (2004) noted, the perceptions of observers, social support providers, and social support receivers frequently vary. Because the design of the observational portion of the study did not include a method for member-checking, only the author's perceptions could be included. However, interview participants were both social support providers and receivers. Content from the interviews often corresponded to observation data. Interviewees explained their perceptions of social support, increasing the understanding of both the perceptions of the participants, as well as the overall context. This allowed the three audiences, providers, receivers, and observer, to influence the final report of social support. The interview data were particularly helpful in explaining the lines of communication of group members outside board meetings, a context in which the author was not permitted to observe.

In addition to weekly board meetings, the group proposes holding membership meetings and legislative meetings on a monthly basis. All group members are invited to these meetings. Participants suggested that legislative meetings were held for the primary reason of disseminating information regarding their political situation. Membership meetings entailed a brief description of current legislation and actions that could be taken to help achieve the group's goal, as well as a time for all participants to speak about their current situations and receive responses from others. It seems reasonable to assume that the latter could serve social support functions. It should be noted, however, that although these meetings are requested monthly by the group, they often are denied or cancelled for various reasons. During the three month period of this study, one board, two legislative, and two membership meetings were cancelled. In addition, the participants were told at the final meeting, "Be advised, I've got two guys down for the summer. One just retired

and the other is on sick leave until August. So, meetings are going to be at a premium.” This suggested that more meetings would be cancelled for reasons outside of the group’s control.

Because of the limited time allowed for meetings, interviewees suggested that group members adapted by conveying information and providing social support to one another via other avenues. One board member with the title “head block representative” distributed information from board meetings to block representatives. These individuals would take the information to the group members on their block and report concerns and questions back to the head block representative. These were then addressed during the weekly board meetings. Communication traveled via various individuals between the board members and other group members. Some interviewees also indicated that they spoke with other group members about the group when at work, in the yard, and in their cells. The relationships formed as a result of membership in the group provided a variety of social support, as explained in the discussion of the interview data. By comparing the findings of the observation data to the interview data, it appeared that the bulk of social support came from outside the group’s formal meetings.

Research Question 2 asked, “How do members of the Pennsylvania Lifers’ Association describe their experiences with the group?” Exploratory research was conducted by means of interviews with 20 group members. These were conducted to obtain information about the decision-making process involved in joining the Pennsylvania Lifers’ Association, current group satisfaction, perceived costs and benefits of membership, changes in relational experiences, spirituality, dedication to the group, and future expectations. The data represented 11 domains, including the decision to

become a member, goals, control, solidarity, identity, intergroup bias, responsibility, member relations, group satisfaction, costs and benefits, and future.

The domain entitled “decision to become a member” included items related to the manner in which one heard about the group and the reasons why he chose to participate. Nearly all participants claimed to have heard about the group from current members. This shows that the group’s efforts to increase participation through recruitment were effective for current members. A few mentioned hearing about the group from incarcerated family members. These individuals were not life-sentenced inmates. This suggests that the presence of the Pennsylvania Lifers’ Association is likely known throughout the entire prison population. In addition, it is probable that the group has a positive reputation. The data suggested that those who chose to participate did so out of curiosity because of the group’s primary goal and group-sponsored programs, as a result of a desire to help others.

Cline (1999) points out that support groups have become more popular through the years because of the diversity of situations for which they can be used. Wheelan (1994) suggests that individuals are more likely to join a group if they feel that group members are similar to themselves and if the group is able to fulfill their needs. These notions clearly apply to the situation of interest. As one participant said, “No one else can understand us.” The Pennsylvania Lifers’ Association is a group run by life-sentenced inmates, for life-sentenced inmates. It addresses the unique needs of this population and works for a goal salient to all members. The group supports programs, such as the Alternatives to Violence Program, that focus on the needs of many life-sentenced inmates, but are open to the entire prison population. Those who joined the group out of curiosity were likely conditional members at first. They initially perceived little cost of

membership and were unsure of their expectations. *Social exchange theory* suggests that because such individuals have continued participation in the group, they were able to find benefits that outweighed the costs. Consistent with this theory, these individuals reported increased numbers of friends and associates, perceptions of control, and ability to forgive. The reasons that participants gave for becoming members of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association did not deviate from those in related literature.

One purpose of the present study was to explore why the group experienced high levels of loyalty and dedication when all attempts to change the laws over the past 34 years have failed. Data included in the domain "goals" helped to reveal the justifications for this loyalty and dedication. Although every participant was deeply concerned with the group's goal of obtaining parole eligibility for life-sentenced inmates, there seemed to be a distinct divide between individuals who focused on this as a group goal and those who focused on it as a personal goal. In addition, participants suggested that the group had a plethora of goals. Therefore, although the desire to secure legislation regarding parole eligibility did not change, the group was successful in supporting rehabilitation-oriented programs and fundraising for nonprofit organizations.

It was evident that all involved were concerned with obtaining parole eligibility for life-sentenced inmates; however, several did not believe this was possible within their lifetimes. These individuals were primarily concerned with helping others. In other words, the goals of the group were important to them for altruistic reasons. These participants tended to be elder members of the group who suggested that helping others gave them a sense of worth and was enjoyable. To them, the group's primary goal was

seemingly less important than the group's other goals and only a partial reason for continued participation.

In contrast, those who discussed the group's goals in terms of how it benefited them tended to speak with high levels of hope for their situation. These individuals expressed optimism that Senate Resolution 149 would be passed or that other legislation would aid in their situations. In addition, they stressed the benefits of the group's other projects to them. For these individuals, it appeared that hope was a primary factor in continued participation. The previous failed attempts by the group did not seem to be discouraging. It should be noted that although these individuals spoke about the benefits of membership as it related to them, this should not be interpreted necessarily as selfishness. Rather, the questions posed by the author focused on individual level benefits. It is likely that it was interpreted by the participants that responses should have similar focus.

The domain control, as mentioned in Chapter 3, tended to evoke emotional responses from the participants. It seems logical that participants would be very aware of the constraints placed on them by what Goffman (1961) labeled "total institutions." It is the primary goal of the prison administration and staff to maintain security (Erger & Beger, 2002; Freshwater et al., 2002; Gallie, 2000; King, 1997; Lin, 2000; Shrubsole & Christ, 2002; Vanyur & Strada, 2002), or, in other words, to sustain control. Because the preventative measures the prison staff often must take to ensure this is accomplished often conflict with the desired actions of the group, it is natural that tension would exist. In fact, Brehm's (1966) *psychological reactance theory* holds that "if a person's behavioral freedom is reduced or threatened with reduction, he will become emotionally

aroused” (p. 2). Under these circumstance, an individual is likely to attempt to decrease the further loss of freedoms and work at regaining lost freedoms. Such behavior was evident among group members. In fact, the primary goal of the group was one which aims to regain lost freedom. Furthermore, the group sought to help its members gain control over themselves (e.g., violence programs), their relationships (e.g., parenting classes), and their futures (e.g., parole eligibility).

Psychological reactance theory suggests that frustration is a common feeling experienced by those facing threatened or lost freedoms. It is understandable that participants viewed obstacles to regaining freedoms negatively. Negative appraisals and frustration with prison staff and administration were evident during interviews. All participants suggested that the group would be more effective if it had greater freedom. Some expressed dissatisfaction with the administration and implied that it took unnecessary precautions which that created excessive restraints on the group. Others recognized that the administration and staff were in a position of authority and felt that when tension arose between the two groups, the group with greater power would make decisions. Those with the latter perception tended to be elder members. It seemed that with time, frustration and negative feelings toward the administration diminished. Further research examining the effects of psychological reactance over time could provide greater insight into this tendency.

Transfers were a source of frustration among several participants. In most cases in which this was an issue, the participant had a close relationship to the member who was transferred. In other situations, an active member with a great deal of influence on the group was transferred. The group holds elections for board members every other year.

When either transfers or elections occur, the group's structure is altered. During the observation portion of the study, the president was transferred to another institution. It was clear that the group disposition would likely change; however, only one additional meeting was observed. The adjustment period would have taken an extended period of time; hence the full change could not be observed. Observation and interview data, however, both suggested that the group changed as new members entered and existing members exited it. This suggests that the group continually engages in socialization and redefinition.

Prior to data collection, the author received anecdotal evidence to suggest that group cohesion was a factor in continued group participation. Interview data were consistent with this evidence. Although the group was divided over some issues, the members still claimed to be cohesive. Most did not see group conflicts as reflective of the bonds among group members. In fact, participants repeatedly stressed the importance of respecting others' views.

The participants also acknowledged the importance of unity within the group. They stated that the group must work together. Through cooperation, many believed that parole eligibility could be obtained. Every member was viewed as important to the group. This served to offer further reassurance of worth. Group members recognized their interdependence in respect to goal achievement.

The four frames of identity encompassed by *communication theory of identity* emerged in the interview data. The data included items pertaining to personal, relational, enacted, and communal identity coded under multiple groups. This provided some evidence that identity management for those in the prison setting was similar to that for

those in free society. An individual's perception of self, roles, and relationships all contributed to the development of his identity.

Evidence of intergroup bias surfaced. This was consistent with previous scholarly literature in reference to four groups and their disparate outgroups: members of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association and nonmembers, life-sentenced inmates and those with minimum sentences, old heads and young bucks, and life-sentenced inmates who had accepted their sentences, and those in denial. These included the group that is the focus of this study, a group of individuals with the same sentence, a group with similar time in incarceration, and a group in which the participants had reached the same level of coping.

A clear distinction existed between the members and non-members of the first three, but the boundaries of the final group were less definitive. Some participants claimed to have accepted the implications of a natural life sentence. For some, acceptance meant realizing that no hope for parole eligibility existed and that participation in the group was only to help future lifers. For others, acceptance entailed the realization that one must stop participating in fruitless activities, such as drug use, fighting, or gambling, and begin working toward changing the laws. Some of these individuals suggested that those who did not accept their sentence were in denial and spoke negatively about these individuals. In contrast, some claimed that accepting the sentence meant giving up the fight. In all cases, individuals judged the group in which they claimed to be a member as more positive than the other groups.

The ideology of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association is one of self-responsibility. The group operates on the assumption that life-sentenced inmates all have a duty and must work cooperatively to change the laws. This was evident in observations of the

group; however, interviews with individual members suggested that their beliefs often conflicted with the group ideology. When discussing spirituality, for instance, many participants suggested that they had a strong relationship with a higher being. Several of these individuals also stated that this spiritual being held all control. Others stated that they had no control as prisoners. Control was instead held by the administration. These personal philosophies were contradictory to the group's internal locus of control, but this did not seem to create dissonance for the interviewees.

The domain entitled "member relations" included units pertaining to diversity, member strengths, respect, friends/associates, and transfers. It is interesting that the definitions of several terms participants used deviated from conventional usage. For example, the term "diversity" had a negative connotation for participants. In addition, the terms "friends" and "associates" held different meanings for many individuals.

When discussing member attributes, participants discussed positive characteristics of other members rather than their negative qualities. More important than individuals' skills was what each member represented. The participants were aware of the importance of numbers to politicians. There seemed to be consensus that with enough individuals supporting the group, the laws would change. Therefore, it was not necessarily the actions of the individual group members that counted, but instead the group and its supporters as a whole. Group membership was most important because of what it symbolized and the message membership numbers conveyed to lawmakers.

“Group satisfaction” comments focused primarily on the group members’ ability to work together and comparisons between the current board and those in the past. Some participants suggested that the group members worked well by coming up with ideas, passing along information, thinking critically, developing plans, evaluating solutions, and contacting those in the public. All, except contacting those in the public, have been identified as effective forms of group behavior. Contacting those in the public was particularly important to this group because it functioned as a means of developing support and obtaining information.

Both participants and staff suggested to the author that previous board members may have been involved in theft at SCI-Huntingdon. In addition, this was given as a possible reason for the termination of several other chapters of the Pennsylvania Lifers’ Association. As a consequence, the administration had tightened controls over the group’s autonomy. While examining the actions of past board members led to distrust toward current board members from the administration, it resulted in positive feelings toward the current board by group members. By contrasting the negative qualities of the previous board, group members were able to emphasize the positive aspects of the current board. Instead, the administration likely transferred the perceptions of the previous board to the current board.

Social exchange theory notes that individuals choose to participate in activities in which they perceive that benefits will outweigh the costs. In examining the costs and benefits associated with group membership, all participants were able to recognize benefits of membership. These included direct and indirect benefits regarding

information sharing, relational experiences, spirituality, social support, problem-solving, anger, depression, stress, daily difficulties, self-efficacy, loneliness, forgiveness, self-esteem, staff relations, personal satisfaction, skills, maturity, and a sense of completeness. In contrast, some claimed that group membership entailed costs that were manifested as time, monetary expenses, negative staff relations, increased stress, and personal dissatisfaction. When discussing the benefits, members appeared to be pleased with the group. In fact, it seemed as though several recognized benefits of the group that they did not consider previously. Participants often gave detailed accounts or anecdotal evidence to illustrate how the group had helped them. In discussing the costs of the group, participants tended to mention them briefly, and often with a justification as to why these costs existed. Costs were either minimized by the members or justified in a manner that made them seem insignificant. Overall, it was clear that the participants overwhelmingly considered the benefits of group membership as greater than the costs. Again, this finding is consistent with *social exchange theory* and *rational choice theory*.

In discussing the future of the organization and its participants, interviewees' responses mixed optimism with pessimism. The concept of hope was mentioned repeatedly. Participants suggested that hope was necessary for their emotional well-being. The sources of hope varied among individuals, however. For some, hope lay in a spiritual being, for others, in politicians and proposed legislation, and for still others in the economy. Some participants guarded themselves against hope so as to protect themselves. These individuals felt that if they did not have expectations, they would not be let down.

The participants seemed optimistic about the future of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association. All felt that membership would either increase or stay the same. No participants suggested membership would decrease in the future, and only one expressed concern that the SCI-Huntingdon chapter might be shut down. This sort of optimism did not continue for those who talked about death. Consistent with prior literature (e.g., Carceral, 2000; Hassine, 2004; Paluch, 2004), life-sentenced inmates seemed to have deep concern for their health, and some expressed fear when discussing their longevity.

Cutrona and Russell's (1987) Social Provisions Scale has been used to measure social support in a variety of populations, including the general population, nontraditional college women, the mentally ill, low income individuals, new mothers, public school teachers, and military nurses (e.g., Caron et al., 1998; Cutrona & Russell, 1987; Quimby & O'Brien, 2004). In each instance, the scale was used to assess six factors: reassurance of worth, attachment, social integration, reliable alliance, guidance, and opportunity for nurturance. In analyzing the data reported by natural life-sentenced inmates, it was found that 21 of 24 items loaded on a single factor. In other research, the scale proved to be multi-dimensional. The data suggest that the population of interest may experience social support in a manner which is either far more or less complex than those in other populations. For the present population, it may be most useful as a general measure of social support.

Contributions to Existing Literature

The findings reported in this dissertation reinforce certain aspects of previous research, while posing challenges to others. Observations of the SCI-Huntingdon chapter of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association were partially consistent with Yalom's (1995) theoretical model. Previous research has shown that the elements of Yalom's model that were not evident in the observations have typically only surfaced in groups having professional aid, such as trained facilitators (Kurtz, 1997; Yalom, 1995). The absence of catharsis, interpersonal learning, and existential factors in this present study, then, is consistent with previous research.

The addition of Weiss's (1974) concept of reassurance of worth proved useful in making Yalom's theoretical model more comprehensive. This element is particularly salient to the life-sentenced population because these individuals have experienced a occurrences that may result in a decreased perception of self-worth. All of the participants were convicted of committing a crime deemed heinous by the majority of the American population and have acquired a variety of negative labels from the Department of Corrections as well as society.

Furthermore, the physical restraints on an individual while incarcerated prevent inmates from participating in activities that could serve to increase self-esteem. For example, a positive correlation has been found between parenting efficacy and self-esteem (Ohan, Leung, & Johnston, 2000). Of those interviewed, 70% reported that they were fathers. Many of these individuals discussed the importance of being a parent to their children during the interview. Although these individuals generally reported having

good intentions, it would not be possible for prisoners to fulfill many expectations of good parenting. Therefore, it is likely that their parental efficacy is decreased as a result of these limitations, which, in turn, leads to lowered self-esteem.

Similarly, pay level (Gardner, Van Dyne, & Pierce, 2004), expressed affection (Floyd, Hess, Miczo, Halone, Mikkelson, & Tusing, 2005), job satisfaction (Alavia & Askaripur), and ownership of material possessions (Ellaway, McKay, Macintyre, Kearns, & Hiscock, 2004; Rohe & Stegman, 1994) have all been linked to perceptions of self-esteem. Each of these is constrained by prison rules and regulations or social norms. A decrease in one's perception of worth would lead to an increase in the desire to fulfill this need. Therefore, the concept of reassurance of worth would be particularly useful in understanding social support in this population.

During the interviews, several participants suggested that the greatest social support benefit received from group membership was not from the entire group. Rather, the relationships formed through group membership grew apart from group meetings. Individuals were introduced during meetings or by other members, and friendships developed during yard, work, or leisure time. It seemed that these dyadic relationships adapted to the changing needs of the individuals in a more time appropriate manner than the group.

Interview data suggest that participants viewed experiences of social support in a similar manner to that explained by matching models of communicated social support. The participants acknowledged particularly stressful situations and the communicative behavior that provided social support. For example, after initial incarceration, many participants reported feelings of hopelessness and loneliness. During this period, others'

revelations of similar past experiences created a sense of universality and instilled hope. This served to decrease the stressors of hopelessness and feelings of uniqueness, which, in turn, reportedly alleviated loneliness and despair. As suggested in Chapter 1, matching models may oversimplify the experience of social support; however, it is important to note that participants described their experiences in this way. Although the communicative phenomenon is likely to be more complex, participants were cognitively able to match feelings of social support with others' behaviors. This indicates that matching models may be valuable in understanding social support, but provides no evidence of such models' predictive value. Furthermore, since this population is aware of supportive behavior and associates these with particular outcomes. Certain expectations concerning social support likely exist and these may have an effect on the perceptions of social support of related behavior provided.

Some participants discussed particular life events that increased their need for social support, for example, a death in the family or transfer of a good friend. Such occurrences caused a shift in the importance of therapeutic factors. Participants also reported that the benefits of group membership changed as individuals' length of increased. For example, universality was extremely important to individuals who were new to the group. After participants recognized that others had similar experiences, this therapeutic factor was not as significant to them. Several individuals who had been incarcerated for long periods of time reported that they had little hope of being released from prison. They did not seem to be interested in the benefit of instillation of hope. Instead, altruism and the feelings of belonging that developed from group cohesiveness were most important. Although it is clear in the previous literature that certain life events

alter the need for social support, the current study suggested that natural life-sentenced individuals go through a predictable series of steps that have corresponding social support needs.

The buffer model of social support suggests that enacted social support can result in individual well-being. This occurs in four steps: conversation, participants' evaluations of social support, coping, and well-being (Goldsmith, 2004). The following observation from a participant who explained that he was no longer suicidal in part because of the social provided by another inmate:

An older lifer helped after I attempted suicide. He said, "There's only one way to deal with life: one day at a time. Don't think about the time you have to do or what you have done. This only leads to depression." And now, that's how I think.

This excerpt exemplifies the steps of the buffer model. First, a conversation took place in which one provided advice to another. This was evaluated by the participant as support. The participant changed his way of thinking, which aided in coping, and improved psychological well-being in that he is no longer suicidal. Consistent with previous difficulties in capturing the link between communicative acts and supportive outcomes as suggested by Goldsmith (2004), statements exemplifying all four stages of the buffer model were rare.

Data from the interviews were consistent with *social exchange theory's* assertion that one will participate in activities, or exchanges, with others if he or she perceives that the benefits of the exchange will outweigh the costs. Participants acknowledged a variety of benefits from participating in the group. Included were information sharing, improved and new relationships, positive changes in spirituality, feelings of satisfaction, increased

social support, improved problem-solving skills, self-efficacy, forgiveness, staff relations, greater maturity, improved skills, and improvements in dealing with anger, depression, stress, daily difficulties, and loneliness. Participants also reported that group membership had associated costs, such as monetary expenses, time, dissatisfaction, and strains on relationships. Nearly all participants commented that the costs were minimal compared to the benefits of membership, which is in line with *social exchange theory*.

Another interesting finding of the study related to identity is the manner in which individuals internalized, rejected, and discussed labels. Becker's (1963) *labeling theory* posits that an individual's behavior often reflects the labels applied to that person. The theory suggests that negative labels might influence an individual to behave in a negative manner; however, the degree to which individuals internalized these labels, as well as the perceptions of the individuals towards the labels seemed to affect their corresponding behavior. Throughout the interviews and observations, participants used several labels to describe themselves, such as "lifer," "inmate," "convict," "elder," and "old head." These labels were generally used in a neutral or positive way. Some participants stopped while speaking to explain the differences between some terms and others with which they are sometimes equated. For example, one participant said, "I'm a convict, not an inmate. An inmate just takes up space." The term "inmate" when used by other participants seemed to be neutral. The terms noted generally have negative connotations. For participants, they did not.

Many participants suggested that they had been labeled negatively by others, but that they consciously rejected the labels. Some rejected labels included "assaultive personality," "inmate," and "lifer". When asked about his experience as a lifer, one

participant commented, “I don’t consider myself that. I’m still fighting.” For these individuals, label assignment by others did not have an effect on their identity. These individuals chose to focus their identity on positive labels, which imply positive behavior. This suggests that individuals had some control in selecting which labels they considered salient and internalized.

Although quite a bit of the data collected during the interview and observational portions of the study were consistent with previous research, the findings for the survey did not meet the a priori assumptions of the investigator. Research Question 3 asked, “Does the structure of social support in groups differ between those in free society and life-sentenced inmates?” In attempting to answer this question, questionnaires including Cutrona and Russell’s (1987) Social Provisions Scale were distributed to all life-sentenced inmates housed in three penitentiaries with active chapters of the Pennsylvania Lifers’ Association. The Social Provisions Scale was theoretically grounded in Weiss’s (1974) work on the provisions of social relationships. Specifically, he asserted that individuals benefit from relationships along six dimensions: attachment, social integration, reassurance of worth, reliable alliance, guidance, and opportunity for nurturance. This scale has been used in multiple studies (e.g., Caron et al., 1998; Quimby & O’Brien, 2004), involving unique populations and highly stressful situations (Cutrona & Russell, 1987).

Unlike previous studies, the results from the data did not support that life-sentenced inmates experience social support as a function of six factors. Rather the evidence suggests that for these individuals, social support may be uni-dimensional. Twenty-one of the twenty-four items loaded on a single factor with an eigenvalue of 9.65

and accounted for 40.22% of the variance in responses. The Cutrona and Russell Social Provisions Scale may be a useful measure of the general experience of social support of life-sentenced inmates, but not specific instance of it.

Further exploration into the three items that did not load on the first factor could provide further insight into the experiences of life-sentenced inmates. One of the three items read, "I feel personally responsible for the well-being of another person." The interview data suggest that individuals feel a great sense of responsibility for themselves, but few mentioned a sense of responsibility for another. Those who did referred to this responsibility in terms of fatherhood. In these cases, individuals suggested that they had a duty to their children, but not necessarily that their children's well-being depended upon them. Inmates who were not fathers were unlikely to have an individual depend on them.

Another item that did not load with the others, "There are people who enjoy the same social activities I do," may seem surprising. Two possible reasons for its lack of connection exist. First, all three prisons included in the study had cell block formats. This means that individuals had less time to interact freely with other individuals, excluding cellmates, than those in dorm style prisons. Individuals likely communicate with a small group of individuals and have limited discussions. Therefore, it is possible that these individuals did not have much opportunity to encounter others with similar interests. A second possibility, and the more likely of the two, is that the number of activities in which one can participate recreationally in prison is limited. There seems to be an abundance of participants willing to participate in each activity. Therefore, if an individual enjoys any type of recreation, there will be others who enjoy and participate in

the activity as well. Participants may respond that others enjoy the same social activities, but may not have this correspond to their perceived level of social support.

The independence of the final item, “Other people do not view me as competent,” can be explained on the basis of the interview data. As discussed earlier, several participants suggested that others, particularly those in free society, viewed them negatively. This was evident when discussing labels as well as when talking about how those with numbers hurt those with letters. The participants tended to reject the negative views of others and to focus on the positive comments of others. This could lead to a separation between others’ views of competence and social support. It should be noted, however, that the survey participants were not required to be members of the Pennsylvania Lifers’ Association. Although the interview data may provide some insight into the survey responses, these assertions can not be considered conclusive because of the different samples.

Cutrona and Russell (1987) note that although Weiss’s (1974) six dimensions of social support are highly intercorrelated, they are distinct. Knowledge of the prison population, related experiences, and relationships within prison could provide evidence explaining why there exists a lack of similar factor structure for this population. According to Weiss (1974), all six types are necessary for an individual to feel sufficiently supported. A lack of any of the six results in feelings of loneliness. As many of the participants indicated, managing loneliness was an ongoing challenge. This suggests that social support is perceived as generally insufficient for the life-sentenced population. It is possible that if the overall level of social support is lacking, these

individuals may not be able to recognize differences among supportive actions and relationships that are beneficial.

The deterioration of an individual's relationships following incarceration is typically accompanied by a variety of negative outcomes. Prisoners are commonly aware of the stressors they and their loved ones experience (Carlson & Cervera, 1991; Paluch, 2004). When completing the surveys for this dissertation, participants were to consider relationships with friends, family members, and all others with whom they communicated. Because inmates were aware of the deterioration in the personal relationships, they may have made comparisons of social support before and after incarceration when completing the survey materials. In other words, it is likely that inmates perceived their levels of social support as lower than they actually were because they are comparing current social support with previous social support. Under these conditions, they might do little to discriminate among the various types.

Weiss (1974) claims that each of the six types of social support is generally supplied within a particular type of relationship. For example, guidance can be provided by teachers, and an opportunity for nurturance is typically provided by parental or spousal relationships. Clearly, these relationships are either greatly strained or lacking within the prison context. Therefore, inmates might either not have pertinent types of relationships and associated social support or form new relationships and that provide several or all of the types.

Most participants seemingly were able to adapt to obtain each type of social support from only companion relationships. Participants suggested that elder lifers frequently served as mentors to new lifers. The elder lifers were able to provide

nurturance, while new lifers received guidance in the process. One participant mentioned, “A friend would have my back without hesitation,” which indicated reliable alliance. Because lifers have developed social networks involving other lifers, they are able to obtain a sense of universality. In addition, this fulfills needs for attachment and social integration. Having meaningful friendships can also function as a reassurance of worth. Because all of these functions would be fulfilled by a small number of platonic relationships with those inside of prison, it is likely that the experiences of guidance, reliable alliance, opportunity for nurturance, attachment, social integration, and reassurance of worth may be so intertwined that those in the population of interest cannot perceive distinctions among them.

A significant contribution of this dissertation is its implications for the way this population should be investigated. As noted, the survey data suggested that previous research regarding social support was not generalizable to the life-sentenced population. Data from the interview and observational portion of the study proved useful in providing possible explanations for this finding. In being recruited for the interview portion of the study, participants displayed considerable enthusiasm. All board members agreed to be interviewed and aided in asking others for their involvement. As word of the study spread throughout the prison, the author was approached by a number of individuals who wished to be interviewed as well. In addition, several participants in prisons who received only surveys sent letters to the author to offer additional information for this report. It was evident that this population desired to speak about their situations. Furthermore, during interviews and observations, the participants discussed topics that were not expected by the author. Valuable findings emerged from the group observations, interviews, and

survey research. Had the author used only quantitative or qualitative methods in this study, many insights may have been lost. Thus, triangulation is particularly important when researching this population.

Limitations

This study had a number of limitations. First, data from observations and interviews were collected using a pen and paper. Notes could not be taken as quickly as participants spoke. The author often had to decide whether to allow participants to continue speaking, and thus lose data or stop participants and alter the stream of thought. In most cases, the author allowed them to continue speaking and recorded the main ideas of the participants' speech. This allowed for the recording of very few nonverbal signals. Furthermore, because no recording devices were permitted, responses could not be reviewed to minimize mistakes.

Social desirability bias may have affected the validity of data collected in all three phases of the study. For the observation and interview data, the characteristics of the author may have had an effect. A few participants made comments about the necessity to be polite in the presence of a female. It is likely that the language used by the participants was restrained. In addition, three distinct comments implied that behavior was altered because of the author's presence. One included an individual telling another he did not want to argue in front of the author, another apologizing for behavior and saying the group would try to be more civil, and another telling a member to stop talking about a certain subject because "there are other ears around." Completed surveys were required

by the Department of Corrections to have an inmates name and number included. A letter accompanying responses suggested that many did not participate because they were uncomfortable with providing identifying information on the surveys. Some responses presumably would have been affected for this same reason.

Human error was also a limitation of this study. All coding was completed by one researcher. As McGrath (1991) has noted, researchers may not know the meaning or function of group acts because they do not have the same experiences as those within the group. Because the group had existed for quite some time, some interactions among members may not have been correctly understood by the author. In fact, many interactions during the first few observations could not be interpreted until the author became more familiar with the group and members' behavior. When assigning meaning to actions and statements, the perception of the observer may not have been the same as the individuals engaged in conversation. Behavior considered supportive by some may have been perceived as intrusive by others (Goldsmith, 2004). Furthermore, because the study was not experimental in design, the determination of causation between functions and outcomes was not possible.

During the casual discussion portion of the meetings, the group separated, and several conversations occurred simultaneously. The author could only listen to and record one conversation at a time. This resulted in the loss of potentially valuable data. Furthermore, the participants frequently used modes of communication that limited observation. For example, notes were passed during the meetings. These were not accessible to the author.

Functional literacy in American prisons is much lower than in the general public. Some participants may have had difficulty comprehending items on the questionnaire. If participants chose to seek help from others, this could increase social desirability bias. It is also likely that individuals having reading difficulties may have chosen not to participate and were not adequately represented in the sample.

Finally, observations were conducted over a three-month period. As mentioned, the group was continually changing. A longer period for data collection would be needed to understand how the group adapted to change over time. Furthermore, research following elections would help in understanding how the group and new members assimilate.

Implications for Future Research

Schmid and Jones's (1994) identity research concentrated on the experiences of short-term sentenced inmates. Their finding of a postponed pre-prison identity was not replicated in the life-sentenced inmate population studied. The participants suggested that as time passed, they began to accept the implications of a natural-life sentence. It is possible that as hope for parole diminishes, so does the attachment to a postponed identity. How this phenomenon is enacted via communication among long-term and life-sentenced inmates is in need of further systematic investigation.

The group members identified a large number of benefits as a result of membership in the group. Further exploration into how these benefits come about could help in understanding how rehabilitation occurs in this population, which would be

beneficial in designing rehabilitation programs. In addition, these benefits, when compared to the costs incurred by the administration and staff, could help in determining the value of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association to the Department of Corrections.

The findings of the survey data suggest that life-sentenced inmates experience social support as uni-dimensionally rather than as the six types reported in previous studies. If so, our current knowledge about social support may not be generalizable to the prison context. Further research should be done to explore various groups within the prison context, such as short- and long-term sentenced-inmates, inmates with various types of convictions, and single and repeat offenders, to explore whether this experience is unique to one group or characteristic of the entire prison population.

Comparisons with Lifers' Associations in states in which life sentences are parole eligible, such as the Louisiana Lifers' Association, could provide information about the impact of the natural life sentence on one's experiences of social support. In addition, research into the communication between various chapters of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association and other support groups throughout the state could provide greater insight into how the group motivates and is motivated by other groups.

Summary

Observational data revealed evidence of 8 of Yalom's (1995) 11 primary factors of therapeutic experiences: instillation of hope, universality, imparting information, altruism, the corrective recapitulation of the primary family group, imitative behavior, development of socializing techniques, and group cohesiveness. Catharsis, interpersonal

learning, and existential factors did not manifest in the data. This was consistent with the Kurtz's (1997) assertions that these qualities were rarely evident in social support groups. In addition to Yalom's concepts, participants also showed evidence of what Weiss (1974) calls "reassurance of worth." This suggests that Yalom's model might be better in explaining the experiences of life-sentenced inmates if expanded to include reassurance of worth.

Interview data coded and reduced to 11 domains, including the decision to become a member, goals, control, solidarity, identity, intergroup bias, responsibility, member relations, group satisfaction, costs and benefits, and future. Explanations of the domains, as well as the subcategories of each were provided. This information was presented in an effort to detail the content features of the interaction of members of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association as they discuss their experiences with and perceptions about the group.

The survey data did not match the a priori assumptions of the author derived from previous scholarship. Rather than revealing the six factors in detailed in Weiss's (1974) theoretical model of social support, data suggested that for life-sentenced inmates, social support was uni-dimensional. Cutrona and Russell's (1987) Social Provisions Scale may be better as an overall measure of social support for this population than a multidimensional scale.

Conclusion

This study was designed to explore the experiences of the life-sentenced population in Pennsylvania and how these individuals communicate social support. Triangulated methods were used in generating evidence of individuals' experiences and group interactions. Several findings of the study contribute to current knowledge of social support.

First, Yalom's theoretical model of social support appears to be incomplete when applied to the experiences of SCI-Huntingdon's board members of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association. The addition of Weiss's "reassurance of worth" may be helpful in accounting for the group's behavior related to social support.

Second, the findings from interviews were consistent with several theories in the Communication and Sociology disciplines. For example, the study yielded evidence of the four frames as describe in *communication theory of identity*. In addition, the data supported the postulates of *rational choice theory*, *social exchange theory*, and *psychological reactance theory*.

The survey data did not support the Cutrona and Russell's (1987) Social Provisions Scale as a measure of the six dimensions of social support described by Weiss (1974). The scale was found to be a highly reliable measure of social support as a continuous attribute. This suggests that current knowledge regarding the experience of social support may not be generalizable to certain segments of the prison population.

This study also served to give a population ostracized and forgotten by most of society a voice. It was clear in the statements made by the participants that they strived to

make life better for themselves and for others. When other life-sentenced inmates passed away during the study, participants took time to remember and reflect on those individuals. These individuals ask for others to do the same for them. It is important for society to recognize that these individuals do exist, and that although they are housed in places where most will never encounter them, their presence nonetheless has an effect on society as a whole.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent Form for Observational Research

INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: Communicating Social Support Behind Bars

Principal Investigator: Frances Huber, Graduate Student
234 Sparks Building
University Park, PA 16802
(814) 865-0127; fnh100@psu.edu

Advisor: Dr. Jon Nussbaum
319 Sparks Building
University Park, PA 16802
(814) 863-3619; jfn5@psu.edu

1. **Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this study is to explore how inmates talk about social support.
2. **Procedures to be followed:** You will be observed while attending regular meetings of the PLA.
3. **Discomforts and Risks:** There are no risks beyond those in everyday life.
4. **Benefits:** You might learn more about yourself and the PLA by taking part. You might learn more about how other people help you. You might find that others have similar feelings. This research might help us learn how social support is conveyed in prison. Learning how inmates talk with one another could help create effective social support groups and programs.
5. **Duration:** You will be observed during weekly PLA meetings for three months.
6. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Only the person in charge will know your name. Data will be stored using false names. This will be kept in a password protected file. Only the researcher will know the password or have access to the data. The Office for Research Protections and the Social Science Institutional Review Board may review project records. If findings are shared, your name will not be used. The researcher is required by the DOC to report information related to illegal activity or suicidal thoughts. Statements made regarding illegal activity or suicidal thoughts will be reported to the superintendent's assistant. The superintendent's assistant will follow up accordingly.

7. **Right to Ask Questions:** You can ask questions about the study. Call Frances Huber at (814) 863-0127 with questions. If you have questions about your rights in this study, contact Penn State's Office for Research Protections at (814) 865-1775.
8. **Compensation:** You will not be paid. You may request a copy of the findings.
9. **Voluntary Participation:** You may choose whether or not to be a part of this study. You can stop at any time. Individuals who choose not to be observed will not have notes taken about them or may choose not to attend meetings. Group members will be notified one week in advance of the researcher's presence so that each person may choose whether or not to attend. Taking part in this study will not affect your sentence or status within the prison.

You must be 18 years of age or older to take part in this study. If you agree to take part in this study and the information above, please sign your name and the date below. You will be given a copy of this signed and dated consent for your records.

Participant Signature

Date

Person Obtaining Consent

Date

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form for Interview Research

INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: Communicating Social Support Behind Bars

Principal Investigator: Frances Huber, Graduate Student
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Advisor: Dr. Jon Nussbaum
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(814) 863-3619; jfn5@psu.edu

10. **Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this study is to explore how inmates talk about social support.
11. **Procedures to be followed:** You will be asked to answer questions during an interview. The questions have been made to help us learn about your decision-making process, group satisfaction, costs and benefits of membership, changes in relationships, spirituality, loyalty to the group, and future hopes.
12. **Discomforts and Risks:** There are no risks beyond those in everyday life. Some of the questions are personal and might cause discomfort.
13. **Benefits:** You might learn more about yourself and the PLA by taking part. You might learn more about how other people help you. You might find that others have similar feelings. This research might help us learn how social support is conveyed in prison. Learning how inmates talk with one another could help create effective social support groups and programs.
14. **Duration:** The interview will take between 45 minutes and two hours to complete.
15. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Only the person in charge will know your name. Data will be stored using false names. This will be kept in a password protected file. Only the researcher will know the password or have access to the data. The Office for Research Protections and the Social Science Institutional Review Board may review project records. If findings are shared, your name will not be used. The researcher is required by the DOC to report information related to illegal activity or suicidal thoughts. Statements made regarding illegal activity or suicidal thoughts will be

reported to the superintendent's assistant. The superintendent's assistant will follow up accordingly.

16. **Right to Ask Questions:** You can ask questions about the study. Call Frances Huber at (814) 863-0127 with questions. If you have questions about your rights in this study, contact Penn State's Office for Research Protections at (814) 865-1775.

17. **Compensation:** You will not be paid. You may request a copy of the findings.

18. **Voluntary Participation:** You may choose whether or not to be a part of this study. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Taking part in this study will not affect your sentence or status within the prison.

You must be 18 years of age or older to take part in this study. If you agree to take part in this study and the information above, please sign your name and the date below. You will be given a copy of this signed and dated consent for your records.

Participant Signature

Date

Person Obtaining Consent

Date

Appendix C

Interview Script

Decision to become a member

- How long have you been a member of the Pennsylvania Lifers' Association?
- How did you initially hear about the group?
- Why did you choose to be a member?
- When you first joined, what did you expect the group would be like/would do for you?

Group Satisfaction

- How much control do you think the group has?
- Do you feel as though others in the group care about you as an individual? What has happened to make you feel this way?
- Do you feel comfortable discussing personal information with other group members? Why or why not?
- Do the members treat one another with respect? How is this displayed?
- Do you trust other members? Why or why not?
- Do you think they trust you? Why or why not?
- Do you consider them friends? Why or why not?
- Do you enjoy going to meetings? Why or why not?
- Do you think the group works well together? Why or why not?

Perceived benefits and costs

- How do you think being a member of the PLA has helped you?
- How do you think being a member of PLA has hurt you?
- Do you think others in the group would really go out of their way to help you? Why or why not?
- Would other members help you make important decisions?
- Since you have started coming to meetings, have you noticed any changes in...
 - How you solve problems?
 - How you cope with anger?
 - How you cope with depression/sadness?
 - How you cope with anxiety or stress?
 - How you cope with difficulties?
 - Feelings of control over your life?
 - Feelings of loneliness?
 - Your ability to forgive others?
 - Your ability to forgive yourself?
 - Your relationship with a spiritual being?
 - How you feel about yourself?

Relational experiences

- Do you have more friends in prison now that you are a member of the PLA? Why or why not?

Appendix D

Survey

Instructions: In answering the following questions, think about your current relationships with friends, family members, and others you come in contact with. Please indicate to what extent each statement describes your current relationships with other people. Use the following scale to indicate your opinion. So, for example, if you feel a statement is very true of your current relations, you would respond with a 4 (strongly agree). If you feel a statement clearly does not describe your relationships, you would respond with a 1 (strongly disagree). There are 24 items.

<u>STRONGLY DISAGREE</u>	<u>DISAGREE</u>	<u>AGREE</u>	<u>STRONGLY AGREE</u>
1	2	3	4

1. ____ There are people I can depend on to help me if I really need it.
2. ____ I feel that I do not have close personal relationships with other people.
3. ____ There is no one I can turn to for guidance in times of stress.
4. ____ There are people who depend on me for help.
5. ____ There are people who enjoy the same social activities I do.
6. ____ Other people do not view me as competent.
7. ____ I feel personally responsible for the well-being of another person.
8. ____ I feel part of a group of people who share my attitudes and beliefs.
9. ____ I do not think other people respect my skills and abilities.
10. ____ If something went wrong, no one would come to my assistance.
11. ____ I have close relationships that provide me with a sense of emotional security and well-being.
12. ____ There is someone I could talk to about important decisions in my life.
13. ____ I have relationships where my competence and skills are recognized.
14. ____ There is no one who shares my interests and concerns.
15. ____ There is no one who really relies on me for their well-being.
16. ____ There is a trustworthy person I could turn to for advice if I were having problems.
17. ____ I feel a strong emotional bond with at least one other person.
18. ____ There is no one I can really depend on for aid if I really need it.
19. ____ There is no one I feel comfortable talking about problems with.

- 20._____ There are people who admire my talents and abilities.
- 21._____ I lack a feeling of intimacy with another person.
- 22._____ There is no one who likes to do the things I do.
- 23._____ There are people I can count on in an emergency
- 24._____ No one needs me to care for them.

Appendix E

Implied Consent Form for Survey Research

Implied Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: Communicating Social Support Behind Bars

Principal Investigator: Frances Huber, Graduate Student
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Advisor: Dr. Jon Nussbaum
319 Sparks Building
University Park, PA 16802
(814) 863-3619; jfn5@psu.edu

19. **Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this study is to explore how inmates talk about social support.
20. **Procedures to be followed:** You will be asked to answer 24 items on a survey. These questions have been made to help us understand how social support is experienced. You will tell whether you agree or disagree with the statements.
21. **Discomforts and Risks:** There are no risks beyond those in everyday life. Some of the questions are personal and might cause discomfort.
22. **Benefits:** You might learn more about yourself. You might learn more about how other people help you. You might find that others have similar feelings. This research might help us learn how social support is conveyed in prison. Learning how inmates talk with one another could help create effective social support groups and programs.
23. **Duration:** It will take about 15 minutes to complete the questions.
24. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Unless prison policies require you to place your name on the return address envelope, no one will know your identity. If you are required to include this information, only the person in charge will know your identity. The envelope will be destroyed. The data will be stored without your name in a password protected file. Only the researcher will know the password or have access to the data. The Office for Research Protections and the Social Science Institutional Review Board may review records related to this project. If findings are shared, your name will not be used. The researcher is required by the DOC to report information related to illegal activity or suicidal thoughts. Statements made regarding illegal activity or

suicidal thoughts will be reported to the superintendent's assistant. The superintendent's assistant will follow up accordingly.

25. **Right to Ask Questions: Right to Ask Questions:** You can ask questions about the study. Call Frances Huber at (814) 863-0127 with questions. If you have questions about your rights in this study, contact Penn State's Office for Research Protections at (814) 865-1775.

26. **Compensation:** You will not be paid. You may request a copy of the findings.

27. **Voluntary Participation:** You may choose whether or not to be a part of this study. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Taking part in this study will not affect your sentence or status within the prison.

You must be 18 years of age or older to take part in this research study.

Completion and return of the survey implies that you have read the information in this form and consent to take part in the research.

Please keep this form for your records or future reference.

Vita
Frances N. Huber

Education

Ph.D. Communication Arts and Sciences, The Pennsylvania State University, 2005
M.A. Speech Communication, Eastern Illinois University, 2001
B.A. Communication, University of Cincinnati, 2000

Teaching Experience

Organizational Communication
Interpersonal Communication
Small Group Communication
Effective Public Speaking

Publications and Presentations

Huber, F. N., Bautista, C., Armstrong, C., & Lara, R. (May, 2005). Coping with homicide: Information management following tragedy. International Communication Association Conference, New York.

Nussbaum, J. F., Pitts, M. J., Huber, F. N., Krieger, J. L., & Ohs, J. E. (2005). Ageism and ageist language across the life span: Intimate relationships and non-intimate interactions. *The Journal of Social Issues*, 61, 285-303.

Huber, F. N. (April, 2005). Visitors' and nonvisitors' perceptions and expectations of prison guards. Eastern Communication Association Conference, Pittsburgh.

Huber, F. N. (April, 2005). Prison regulations: Maintaining control through communication. Eastern Communication Association Conference, Pittsburgh.

Briddell, L. O., & Huber, F. N. (November, 2004). Community corrections: Evaluating a local work release program. American Society of Criminology Conference, Nashville.

Huber, F. N. (March, 2004). A theory of the impact of affiliate's perception in captive and chosen relationships. Central States Communication Association Convention, Cleveland. Top three student paper for the Communication Theory Division.

Huber, F. N. (March, 2004). The effect of social interaction of inmates on recidivism. Central States Communication Association Convention, Cleveland.

Huber, F. (2001). Defining the communication discipline. *Journal of the Illinois Speech and Theatre Association*, 70, 13-21.

Selected Honors and Activities

Graduate Scholar Award, Pennsylvania State University
Top three student paper for the Communication Theory Division, CSCA, 2004
Departmental acknowledgement for excellence in teaching
NCA Prison Pre-Conference Planning Committee member
Student editor for *The Review of Communication*
The AIDS Project test counselor
Department delegate to the Graduate Student Association
Guest speaker for Centre County Prison