



# A Rough Aging out: Graffiti Writers and Subcultural Drift

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## Abstract

*Many studies have provided rich ethnographic accounts of graffiti writing subculture, highlighting the roles of masculinity, resistance, and other dynamics that help shape these subcultures. In the current inquiry we examine the lives of a group of graffiti writers in a mid-sized city in southern Ontario, Canada. Our inquiry draws attention to the aging-out process of graffiti writers as they enter adulthood, seek employment and form relationships with non-graffiti writers, while at the same time striving to remain members of what it at its core a deviant subculture. Our analysis draws on life course, subcultural and drifts theories, illustrating the potential for combining these perspectives in future research on deviance in general.*

Keywords: Graffiti, deviance, life course criminology, subcultural theory, drift.

## Introduction

Numerous criminological inquiries have explored graffiti writing subcultures, including Ferrell's (1996) landmark "Crimes of Style" and Snyder's (2009) exploration of the relationship and transition between deviant graffiti subcultural and professional graffiti writing. Snyder (2009) suggests that writers come together because of their shared love of writing graffiti, and while risk and excitement are parts of the experience, an artistic core resonates with many members of this subculture, enabling them to connect with non-deviant opportunities.

In the current inquiry we explore how and why some graffiti writers do transition into non-deviant lifestyles and careers, but more specifically examine through the lens of a life-course perspective how graffiti writers struggle to age out of deviant subcultural involvement while pursuing relationships with non-deviant co-workers, family members, and friends. Ultimately we suggest that this aging out process is not a clean one, but is indeed a rough, often back-and-forth process.

Life course theory (see Moffitt, 1993; Sampson & Laub, 1990) has become a popular paradigm for explaining and understanding criminal careers and the transition from

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youthful delinquency into either adult criminality or non-criminality, but some have questioned this perspective's ability to account for individual level issues with respect to transitions away from crime and deviance (see, e.g. Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). Our study builds on the notion that individual level factors influence the aging out process, and we seek to critically examine this process by integrating subcultural (See, e.g. Cohen, 1955; Cloward & Ohlin, 1960) and drift (see Matza, 1964) perspectives.

### **The Present Study**

Our study examines a subculture of graffiti writers in a midsized town in southern Ontario, focusing on its members move into adulthood; a transition that is often accompanied by the legitimizing of formerly delinquent behavior (see also Snyder, 2009).

In this paper we seek to integrate several theoretical perspectives within a methodological and analytical framework that is somewhat novel to these theoretical constructs. To be more specific, we are concerned with how life-course theory and subcultural theories (e.g., Cohen, 1955; Cloward & Ohlin, 1960) of criminality and deviance can be combined to provide a more focused understanding of the relationship between micro-level individual events and relationships and structural moves toward or away from deviance. To explore this concept we draw on in-depth qualitative interviews and ethnography of graffiti writers who are either passed the average "aging out" point or on the verge of this aging out process.

We suggest that these integrations of theory and methodology are novel for two reasons: First, there exists a gap in the extant literature that links micro and macro level theoretical approaches. Second, tests or expansions of life-course theory rely primarily on quantitative analyses of criminality interacting with age and in some cases specific life-event variables (e.g., marriage, acquisition of employment). Our study draws instead on an in-depth examination of a small number of persons within a deviant subculture. Through this approach we are able to focus in on one specific aspect of life-course criminal trajectory that we argue is underdeveloped: specifically what we will describe as a "rough" transition between adolescent delinquency and either adult delinquency or adult desistance.

The rough transition between juvenile delinquency and adult criminal orientations (either persistence or desistance) is, we suggest, an artifact of subcultural complexities associated with not just juvenile offending but also adult relationships. In essence, we agree with life-course theory's proposition that as juveniles grow more distant from school-aged peers, make new friends at work and establish relationships that they will grow less likely to engage in crime. However, our research illuminates the difficulties in this transition process, suggesting that it may be more likely for some persons to "drift" between delinquent and non-delinquent behaviors, roles and groups (Matza, 1964). Those in the subculture we study are not so quick to distance themselves from their youthful companions, and in fact struggle to remain connected to these companions and the subculture they constitute while also occupying and maintaining "legitimate" social and economic positions (e.g., family and work).

In this examination we will first discuss some of the major scholarly works on graffiti, examining how they approach the concepts of subculture and aging out, and then applying a similar organizational structure, present an analysis of our own findings. Throughout this discussion we place emphasis on qualitative excerpts from field research,

our goal being to provide a collective narrative account of both graffiti subculture and the struggles that writers face when entering adulthood.

### **Literature Review**

Examinations of graffiti and those who write it have informed a number of inquiries in criminology. Some of these inquiries have focused on the relationship between graffiti and serious criminal involvement (Brown, 1978; Dovey, Wollan & Woodcock, 2012) (e.g. gang membership and activity) while others have focused primarily on the subcultural organization of “taggers” (Brighent, 2010; Ferrell, 1995; Valle & Wess, 2010). In this literature review we focus our attention on the latter, specifically examining some of the seminal research in the area of graffiti subcultures, and how this research relates to life course trajectories and deviant involvement.

### ***Graffiti Subcultures & Mainstreaming***

As Ferrel (1997) notes, many youth are excluded from public involvement and must carve out their own individual and group (i.e. subcultural) identities. The link between public exclusion and subcultural development is particularly interesting in the case of graffiti writing, where there is an increasing movement toward “mainstreaming” elements of the subculture. Snyder (2009) draws attention to the reality that graffiti subculture, though still focused on forms of resistance, is becoming increasingly mainstream.

In the case of graffiti subculture, it is perhaps the case that resistance has manifested in the form of (or from) a rejection of dominant moral values in favor of the adoption of an amoral stance on personal and group behaviors (see, e.g. Hagan, 1998). For example, Ferrel (1997) and Snyder (2009) both suggest that graffiti writers generally view their writing as largely harmless, but even more so as seemingly outside the realm of moral consideration. Indeed, as these authors articulate, graffiti is at the same time a deeply personally satisfying pursuit, a rewarding group bonding experience, as well as a rejection of forms of control.

Ultimately, the tension between a subculture of resistance and mainstream exposure and acceptance is central to the current inquiry, where we contend that graffiti writers themselves struggle not only with the conflicts associated with the watering down of the resistant element of their subculture, but also their own involvement in mainstream (i.e. dominant) culture. In this regard, the mainstreaming of graffiti subculture relates to Matza’s (1964) contention that many delinquents do not reject dominant values, but instead integrate them into their own subcultures (see also Topalli, 2005). This integration of dominant values relates to Cloward and Ohlin (1960) and Cohen’s (1955) conceptualization of different subcultural adaptations of dominant values. In the case of graffiti writing it may well be that there is a combination of adaptation and adoption by both dominant culture and graffiti subculture.

### ***Graffiti and Life-course Deviant Involvement***

There is clearly a link between graffiti writing and subcultural involvement, but it is our intention here to examine whether or not, and if so, how this involvement changes over the life course. Traditionally, large cohort studies have established important links between juvenile and adult offending (see e.g., Kempf-Leonard, Tracy, & Howell, 2001), but as Paternoster and Bushway (2009) suggest, these studies are not necessarily well equipped to examine the micro-level constructs responsible for friction during the late

adolescent and adult aging out cycle. In the current study we are particularly interested in these processes, but must move forward with a clear understanding of how general life-course dynamics relate to deviant involvement.

Life course theory asserts that certain transitions (e.g. marriage, employment) influence decisions to persist with or desist from criminal involvement (see Moffitt, 1993; Sampson & Laub, 1990). Life course theory argues that these dynamics create different offender or non-offender trajectories that are essentially the equivalent of longitudinal behavior typologies.

When linked with micro-level subcultural constructs related to deviant participation, these typologies can both gain explanatory power and face challenges as the complexities of individual and group differences draw out the tensions inherent to many deviants' actual lived experiences. Combinations between life-course and other theoretical perspectives have already illuminated some connections between life transitions, control and peer involvement (see Warr, 1998) and here we seek to further pinpoint some of these dynamics at the subcultural level. Graffiti writing is a particular well suited context in which to do so because graffiti writers are known to struggle with (and in some cases profit from) the overlap between deviant and non-deviant sectors of their lives (see, e.g. Snyder, 2009's discussion of the popular demand for graffiti art in New York).

Hasley and Young (2006) draw attention to the almost constant friction between deviant and non-deviant involvement in graffiti writing. They note that many writers have opportunities to create art, but that they also maintain opportunities and a desire to write illegally. Snyder (2009) and Kramer (2010) also find that there is often an overwhelming desire to simply "create" graffiti. This desire is as much a part of the growing up (and aging-out) process as it is a subcultural component. For example, Kramer (2010) and Snyder (2009) both draw attention to the reality that many writers are able to show in galleries and paint with permission as they improve their skill.

"Legitimate" spaces for writing graffiti challenge the resistance-focused origins of graffiti subculture (Brighenti, 2010; Valle & Weiss, 2010), but they also draw out important questions regarding the life course transitions of graffiti writers from juvenile delinquents to adults occupying the status of "offender," artist, or some position between these two. To understand this transition process it is important to focus specifically on the concept of aging out.

### ***Aging Out***

Aging out of crime is the consequence of the aforementioned turning points (e.g. marriage), empirical examinations have demonstrated that this process is more dynamic than a discrete either/or point in space and time. For example, there is evidence that aging out of crime is not an absolute nor an irreversible transition (see, e.g. Hagedorn's, 1994 study of adult drug dealers); former offenders often slip back into offending, then back out again (see also Maruna, 2001). In the case of graffiti this process is further complicated by the increasing links between mainstream culture and deviant graffiti subculture.

There is a distinct connection between media and the maintenance and spread of deviant graffiti subculture (see, e.g. Snyder, 2006). This culture has longstanding ties with hip-hop and urban resistance (Lachmann, 1988; Austin, 2002). However, the increasingly mainstream nature of graffiti culture underscores the reality that there is a constant friction between legal and illegal subcultural involvement, but also a constant presence of and

influence from subcultural “voices” in the life of the graffiti writer. Indeed, most studies of graffiti writing draw attention to the extreme immersion in graffiti subculture of those who write.

An understanding of the aging out process as it relates to graffiti writing thus requires a close examination of the links between graffiti (sub)culture and individual life-course deviance. There is indeed evidence that individual aging out is related to constructed identities within various life-realms. For example, Paternoster and Bushway (2009) discuss the concept of “working selves,” or the collective dynamics of an individual’s self and group factors that contribute to what an individual aspires to be. This perspective acknowledges and in part explains potential breaks from deviant involvement, adding credence to the argument that aging out is a process related to involvement in one if not many social contexts (e.g. work and graffiti writing subcultures).

In the case of graffiti writing, involvement in both mainstream culture and deviant subculture(s) can create internal conflicts in addition to interpersonal ones between deviant actors and those they must relate to in these different contexts (see, e.g. Timor, 2001). In such cases where internal conflicts arise in moral gray areas, it stands to reason that drifting between deviant and non-deviant definitions would become increasingly taxing on internal conceptions of self and external, interpersonal relationships.

It is clear that much of the scholarly inquiry into graffiti writing has focused on its quality as a subculture of deviance. However, recent studies such as Synder’s (2009) are beginning to draw attention to the multifaceted nature of graffiti, and specifically how it is becoming increasingly legitimized. Kramer (2010) goes further still, suggesting that a subset of almost exclusively legal graffiti writers has emerged. He notes the relationship between societal and legal labels and the changing nature of what he argues are fluid subcultures of graffiti. In the current inquiry we find a similar phenomenon whereby many of the writers we spoke with were able to write with permission, but we also found that even these writers would engage in illegal writing, in part to maintain ties to deviant subculture. Thus, it is our contention that subcultures of graffiti may be less fluid than they are multifaceted, or even compartmentalized. In this inquiry we will explore how these compartments and facets relate to the drifting between deviant and non-deviant involvement, and furthermore how this drifting challenges an assumption that aging out of deviance is a smooth process.

### **Sample and Method**

Perhaps due to the “edgy” nature of graffiti subculture, it is often the case that research on graffiti examines it from a ground level, ethnographic perspective. While this approach is certainly valuable, yielding rich data that makes clearer the nuances of a subculture of resistance, there may also be value in approaching graffiti writing from a less entrenched perspective. Specifically, direct participatory involvement with graffiti writers by a sole investigator removes the possibility of comparison between the perspectives of multiple investigators. The ties between graffiti subculture and masculinity also call into question the relationship between male observers/interviewers and the writers with whom they are engaged.

In the current study we wanted to avoid approaching graffiti subculture as “college boys... fascinated with the corner boys” (Heidensohn, 1985, p. 141). The nature of our access to the respondents helped to naturally avoid this pitfall. One of the authors has close relationships with many of the writers we interviewed, thus serving as a

“gatekeeper” to the setting and also establishing an immediate rapport and trust with respondents. This relationship also allowed us to have a better understanding of argot of the studied population, (e.g. “tag” names). This understanding was bolstered by clarification from participants during the organization and writing of this paper. The addition of a second researcher also played an important role in minimizing potential bias that could result from existing relationships with respondents. In addition, having both a female and male interviewer present at most interviews created an opportunity for concurrence, disagreement, and ultimately cross-validation of data.

While we did not participate directly in graffiti writing, we did engage writers in “the field.” In the case of our research this field takes several forms. Similar to Kramer’s (2010) study of 20 graffiti writers in New York City, most of our interviews were conducted during legal graffiti writing events during the summer of 2011. These events brought together not only writers willing to participate, but also ones who “came out to support” or simply “hang out” at the events. Both events lasted three days and provided an excellent opportunity to casually engage writers in a naturalistic setting. We were able to interview writers as they worked on the wall, took breaks, or mingled amongst themselves while hip hop music played in the background. In addition, several writers were interviewed after these events, over the course of several months. These interviews took place in the writers’ homes or in some cases in the researcher’s home.

In total, we interviewed 14 writers, the youngest of whom was 21, and the oldest 32. The average age of the writers was 26 and all were white except one Asian writer. Since age is central to our discussion of life-course deviance and aging out, we have noted in parentheses the age of each respondent after the first reference to them. Five of the respondents did not wish to have their tags identified, so they are referred to here as “respondent” #1-6.

There are some clear limitations to our study. The small sample size limits the generalizability of our findings, but this is a common issue with in-depth qualitative analyses, and the internal validity of our findings is bolstered by the close proximity of the researcher(s) to the respondents, as well as our ability to ask respondents about one another, thus cross-validating their responses. The lack of systematically collected longitudinal data about our respondents also requires a careful approach to an assessment of life-course dynamics. However, again, our close proximity to the writers allows us to draw from their narrative accounts in a way that counters any concerns about longitudinal data, or the lack thereof. Essentially, because of the age of our respondents (on average 26) we are able to examine the tensions of aging out as they occur, but also draw out accounts (albeit obviously retrospective in nature) of the events leading up to the writers’ current life-situations.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### ***Entering a Subculture of Graffiti***

Subcultural perspectives often assert that persons – particularly youth – join or form subcultures because they feel that dominant culture does not accept them. The discussed link between graffiti subculture and resistance suggests that such a dynamic is a particularly salient motivator in the decision for youth to begin writing graffiti. Interested not only in aging out, but also how the writers we interviewed began their involvement in graffiti writing, we asked them to describe their earliest memories of exposure to graffiti and graffiti (sub)culture.

A number of writers cited their fathers as major influences in their path toward graffiti writing. Snare (25) shared that on a trip to Montreal his father pointed to graffiti on a highway underpass and told him it would “take balls” to do something like that. Meas (25) was also influenced by his father. He told us that his father would leave cartoon notes for him. Meas “wanted to draw like that.”

As will be discussed, many of the writers we spoke with have become involved in legal art through their graffiti writing, but in some cases involvement in legal art led to their interest in graffiti and the culture surrounding it. For example, respondent #1 (21) explained to us that he became fascinated with graffiti as a child in art school, and gravitated toward illegal writing as he was “an adolescent teenager that liked to fuck shit up.” This gravitation toward altering and challenging existing surfaces can serve as a motif for the afore-discussed nature of graffiti subculture as a locus of resistance – a spring of empowerment for its members (Brighenti, 2010; Dovey, Wollen & Woodcock, 2012; Ferrell, 1995; Macdonald, 2001).

Empowerment through graffiti is perhaps one of a list of narrow options for some youth, especially those who feel they lack access to other subcultures because of their race, class, and gender. For example, for OSCAR (32), involvement in hip hop culture was a natural gateway into writing. He told us he could have aspired to be a white rapper, dancer, or graffiti writer, and he only had the skill for the latter. The connection between hip hop culture and graffiti was noted by a number of the writers:

*“I think the hip hop music has always had a huge influence, but I mean...ummm...you just see it everywhere when you are young and you don’t know what it is. And as soon as you start focusing in and researching it you become intrigued. But for the most part it’s a mystery, like you are always finding out new stuff about it” (ST8 (27)).*

As ST8 suggests, graffiti writing is interconnected with hip hop culture, but graffiti is also a deep and fascinating pursuit; to essentialize it as a subculture of deviance, resistance, or any other singular component would do it a disservice. The public’s tendency to reduce graffiti writing in this way indeed serves as a source of frustration for writers. One particular account illustrates how graffiti writers are excited by graffiti and have difficulty understanding why this excitement is not shared by more in the public:

*“I think I was on a bus heading back with ‘Doz’ and it was shitty outside and the windows were all fogged up and in walks ‘Wade’ (graffiti artist) and another writer, and they started tagging all the fogged up windows and the bus driver got so pissed, and kicked them off the bus. And I just remember being like ‘f..k that was so awesome’ and not understanding even back then why people got so angry at graffiti” (ST8).*

In this case the driver seems to serve as an analogy for the public in general—a public that, in the estimation of the writers we spoke with, fails to grasp that graffiti writing is indeed not amoral, random, and purely chaotic. Several writers we spoke with noted that they would not tag on churches and other public spaces where children might witness their work, which is consistent with previous research pertaining to self-imposed limitations that prevent acting on certain surfaces (Ferrell, 1995; Valle & Weiss, 2010).

They also cited the sacredness of the church as a reason for avoiding these sites as tagging locations. These self-imposed boundaries coincide with what is perhaps a deeper interest and understanding of graffiti as art—an understanding that the writers hope to impart on new graffiti writers. The mentoring process and culture of community has been cited as an important process of perfecting ones skill (Wenger, 2008; Valle & Weiss, 2010). This “culture of learning”, as respondent #5 (23), told us, involves connecting with young writers to “keep the cycle going.”

Thus, entrance into graffiti writing does certainly involve an attraction to deviance, resistance, and even destruction, but it is not singularly focused on these elements. The complexity of graffiti subculture is perhaps a reflection of the complexity of its members, and in turn it is logical that tensions arise when writers seek to connect their deviant involvement with the typical processes of growing older, engaging in dominant cultural pursuits, and reflecting on their own trajectories in life.

### ***Staying Deviant***

The focus of this inquiry is on the struggle between aging out of deviance while still remaining connected with a deviant subculture. This tension is illustrated by the apparent reality that no matter how many legal venues for writing graffiti emerge, illegal spaces remain more culturally and symbolically lucrative for many writers. For example, respondents in our interviews confirmed what many researchers have found (e.g. Ferrell, 1998) in that trains remain perhaps the single most important canvas on which graffiti writers desire to make their mark. Trains are also central to the subcultural code of graffiti writing. PMON (26), for example, told us that he waited eight years before tagging his first train. He did so because he felt he was not ready, but also because to do so prematurely would damage his reputation and violate an unspoken subcultural code.

For PMON in particular, graffiti writing was accompanied by other forms of deviance, and even serious crime. PMON became involved in serious drug use and at one point assaulted a cab driver, breaking one of his legs. PMON served a year of house arrest for this assault, during which time he sold drugs. Interestingly, this experience made it more difficult for PMON to return to graffiti writing. As he told us, he was “rusty.” Meas was also no exception to serious crime. He told us that he was involved in “gang banging and other serious stuff.” For Meas, graffiti was actually a “release” from the harsh reality of his life. The freeing escape of writing graffiti is perhaps best articulated by Snare (25), who told us that “graffiti is a lifestyle onto its own; it’s freedom to do what you want, when you want to do it.”

Ultimately, the connectedness between crime and deviance in the form of graffiti writing is significant to this inquiry because it represents the opposite end of the spectrum from aging out into dominant, law-abiding adulthood. It is with this spectrum in mind that we move forward and examine how writers confront the tensions of the aging out process.

### ***Going Mainstream***

Snyder (2009) draws attention to the reality that graffiti is increasingly becoming a desired public commodity, yet the public still generally seeks to root out and eliminate not only graffiti but also those responsible for creating it (see, e.g. Ferrel, 1995; Taylor, Cordin & Njiru, 2010).

Commenting on how the public perceives graffiti, ST8 suggests that:

*“you have people that f..king love it, and you have people that absolutely f..king hate it, and you have people that tolerate it and then people that are curious. I think, whatever the case is, graffiti is always going to do the same thing that it was always meant to do, make you stop and think about how it got there and what possessed somebody to do that.”*

However, not all public and government representatives are opposed to graffiti writing, and indeed in many cases they work with writers to promote their art in public spaces that the public view as “appropriate” venues (see Halsey & Young 2002). Thus, central to the current research question to examine the motivations for graffiti writers when they choose to use these venues (and go mainstream), to continue writing illegally, or some combination of these.

Going mainstream could merely be a consequence or component of the aging out process. As ST8 remarks on the state of graffiti in the city where he writes, one prominent “crew [group of writers] ended...but ya at that time was like [several writers] was just about ending or dying...cause all those guys were getting serious careers...” ST8 further explains that “they were getting serious about their lives, realizing the consequences of their actions.”

Getting serious about one’s life is a sentiment echoed by other writers, but this seriousness is either mediated by or in competition with the ever-present playfulness and resistance central to graffiti writing. For example, Respondent #5 now considers himself a “street artist.” He tries not to do “tagging” because he believes it “gives a bad name to graff.” Nevertheless, he told us that he enjoys tagging under bridges and has been fined for trespassing doing so. Meas is more direct in his explanation of why he prefers illegal writing, he tells us that “if it wasn’t illegal, it wouldn’t be as fun.” Respondent #2 (22), who does not consider himself a “tagger” or “bomber” shares this perspective, telling us that graffiti is “a way to get stress off your chest” but that it is also thrilling when risking falling off a bridge or being caught by the police.

Though writing illegally may be exhilarating and even stress-relieving, others writers are able to channel these feelings while writing legally. Respondent #6 (28) told us that he is completely at peace when writing legally, that he never used drugs while writing, and that for him it is not about the thrill of doing something illegal. While he agrees that one must earn respect by starting with illegal tagging, he no longer sees this as appealing, telling us “he will never write illegally again.” Indeed, writing itself can be addictive, as respondent #5 told us, “once you start, it’s like an addition. You don’t stop. It’s a lifestyle. I don’t think I will ever stop.”

For others, the stigma of being a “tagger” and engaging in illegal behavior is motivation to focus on legal writing. Respondent #3 (23) prefers legal walls because he is bothered by the stigma attached to illegal writing, but he still engages in illegal writing. Water (32) represents the closest to a completely mainstream writer in our sample. Water does commissioned work and commercial designs on, for example, snowboards. Nevertheless, even Water began in the same way as many of the other writers we spoke to: “smoking weed under the bridge” with friends, writing graffiti. Water believes that “kids need to do illegal graffiti to get started.”

Water’s sentiments bring us full circle with respect to the life-course. As many studies have made clear (e.g. Ferrel, 1997; Halsey & Young, 2006; Snyder, 2009; Benavides-

Vanegas, 2005) resistance to mainstream culture and authority is a strong component of graffiti writing subculture, of which even the most mainstream of those we interviewed consider themselves a part. However, a full commitment to resistance often erects a barrier to full involvement in non-deviant careers and lifestyles. For example, toward the end of our research, the local police conducted a sting, raiding the house of one of the writers we had spoken with. They confiscated graffiti supplies and later filed charges. This same writer is connected to both legal and illegal writing.

### ***A Rough Aging Out***

We are not suggesting that for graffiti writers “aging out” are entirely synonymous with going mainstream, but there is an undeniable relationship between the two. Based on our findings we suggest that this connection manifests itself primarily in the form of tension between deviant and mainstream life; necessitating that one “drift” between the two in order to maintain relational ties, employment, and a sense of self-belonging. Matza (1964) suggests that drift is a gradual process, and also acknowledges that subcultural involvement influences this process (p. 33). While we agree with Matza’s (1964) contention that drifting between law-abiding and delinquent is gradual, we suggest here that for graffiti writers, once this drifting has occurred (in either direction) it may, and indeed must, be re-visited in order to simultaneously maintain relational ties in dominant culture and graffiti subculture.

For those we interviewed, one of the most obvious difficulties in balancing involvement in graffiti writing other social realms comes in the decision to share or withhold information about being a graffiti writer and what this involves. This tension exists even for legal graffiti writers, for example, because ST8 is serious about legal graffiti writing, he notes that he must be careful when addressing members of the community:

*“I have got to be really careful about what I say to whom ( i.e., business owners, community members, politicians) Dealing with politicians, dealing with people that just don’t know or understand the art form just people that don’t understand it I really have to be careful with because they can misinterpret it so easily, they already have such a negative stigma towards it, so I am just very careful how I talk to them.”*

ST8 goes on to explain that he alters his lingo when discussing graffiti with community members, opting to emphasize his passion for tagging.

For illegal writers, the decision to bring family and co-workers into the knowledge of graffiti subculture is problematic, often eliciting fear and anxiety surrounding the prospect of being misunderstood or even shamed. For example, OSCAR (32) told us during an interview that newspaper stories about “busts” in which he was arrested made it hard for him to be around family and co-workers. Similarly, Snare’s apartment was raided in the city’s largest graffiti bust and his mother and other family members saw a news story in the paper about the bust. He recalls that many of them called his family, asking if he was in jail. For these writers the realms of deviant and non-deviant came into contact, giving them little option but to confront the resulting tension.

The tension that exists for illegal writers is not to suggest that they have thoughts of leaving graffiti subculture. In fact, they may be likely to draw on the resistance that is central to this subculture in order to stand up to or dismiss critics. OSCAR had to call his

job twice from jail because of graffiti related arrests. He told us that he was embarrassed but that if his co-workers “didn’t like it, fuck them.” Nevertheless, he believes that the best approach is to show his co-workers the “art side,” not “the illegal stuff.” OSCAR was also supported by his mother when he began writing when he was in high school, but by age 20 when she would arrive home and see his hands covered in paint, she began to ask if he was “still doing that?” He told us that she has become less approving as he has gotten older.

Others simply avoid discussing graffiti with persons outside of the subculture. Worried they will “judge him,” participant #1 does not talk about graffiti writing with non-writers. For others still, there is an opportunity to incorporate graffiti into “acceptable” forms. For example, Melo is in university studying art now, and he tries to incorporate graffiti into most of his art. He told us that the general public fails to understand that graffiti on walls and in a gallery are “one in the same.” For Melo, however, incorporating graffiti into his legal work is perhaps more a testament to his love of graffiti and desire to bring it into other realms of his life and work than it is an attempt to make it “acceptable.” Indeed, he is committed to illegal graffiti, telling us that *“when I’m 45 walking my dog, I’d like to think I’ll have a marker and throw up a tag and freak the neighbors out.”*

Other writers do not envision themselves continuing illegal involvement. Even though respondent #3 currently writes illegally (though preferring to do so on legal walls) he nevertheless does plan to stop “when he gets older and has kids.” Water, who went to university and now creates commercial graffiti suggests that “the other part of their [illegal writers] lives are in shambles.” He views moving into legal writing as the natural and logical progression. For him, graffiti has become a profitable career. Water’s perspective is obviously not shared by all, or even the majority of writers, even those inspired by him. For example, Respondent #6 (29) was inspired by Water. He went to school to become a chef and now works part time and lives at home, still actively writing illegal graffiti.

Ultimately, though there is undeniable tension between involvement in graffiti subculture and attempts to form bonds and connections with “dominant” cultural institutions and pursue associated aspirations, the graffiti writers we spoke with returned again and again to their genuine passion for writing, and the culture that surrounds it. Respondent #4 (28) noted this “graff community” as one aspect of writing that he enjoys the most. For respondent #4, there is no question that he will “always” be a writer. It is what he loves, and it is a defining part of who he is as a person.

### **Conclusion: Implications**

As we discussed earlier, our intention in this analysis has not been to offer an in-depth exploration of graffiti subculture, but instead to use graffiti writing as a context in which to examine the aging out process. In doing so we have drawn attention to the reality that forming “pro-social” bonds (see Hirschi, 1969, Sampson & Laub, 1990) traditionally associated with adult life does not necessarily lead to desistance from deviant subcultural involvement. Instead, our findings add to the understanding that individual level factors influence the aging out process based on commitment to subcultural ties, thus, providing theoretical support for both subcultural (Cohen, 1955; Cloward & Ohlin, 1960) and drift (Matza, 1964) perspectives.

Moreover, our findings confirm previous research that suggests during the aging out process there occurs an integration of the subculture into more “legitimate” spheres (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Cohen, 1955; Matza, 1964; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009;

Synder, 2009). The case of graffiti writing is perhaps unique because graffiti is considered art by so many who create it, and even many who view it (either in galleries or on the street). Thus, to the extent that deviant or criminal involvement is linked with subcultural membership and true commitment to the associated behaviors, it stands to reason that much tension will exist as members grow older and begin to form adult social bonds.

There is also reason to believe that this process is culturally sensitive (see, e.g. Savolainen, 2009), and as we argue here, also sensitive to subcultural identification. Therefore, our findings provide a strong argument for incorporating subcultural, drift, and life-course theory. This integration will, in our estimation, more realistically account for the tumult of passage into adulthood, and why some choose to remain deeply connected with deviant or criminal subcultures while others sever these ties.

Though not the focus of our inquiry, we feel obliged to discuss briefly the obvious policy implications emergent from our findings. These are twofold. First, local political and perhaps even criminal justice officials should attempt to work more openly with graffiti writers if they wish to gain their respect. While many writers will likely remain skeptical of such interaction, it may nevertheless help the public become more aware of the artistic nature of much graffiti. A focus on graffiti as “gang related” is counterintuitive to this process and particular group. Second, political and criminal justice agencies should develop a realistic understanding that graffiti is likely to remain resistant to even the most well intentioned efforts to transition it fully into the public, legal realm. This recommendation may seem to contradict the first, but it is meant to temper the expectations of officials seeking to transform graffiti subculture into something mainstream. This is not what most graffiti writers we spoke with want. They desire public respect for what they do, but they do not require it to fuel their passion, nor do they wish to have this public respect and understanding undermine the rich culture of graffiti writing, at the center of which remains a resistance to much of what “growing up” (i.e. aging out) demands.

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