



Ruth Peterson

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# On Becoming “A Teacher or Something”: An Autobiographical Review

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## Keywords

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## Abstract

This autobiographical review reflects on how I came to attend college, go to graduate school, and become a professor of sociology specializing in criminology. My story is about an African-American child growing up in the rural Jim Crow South with expectations of being destined to have an impressive career. I identify the source of my high career expectations, the roles of family members in helping fulfill these expectations, the educational experiences that I had and what I took from them, and how my career evolved as a university professor. I also discuss my efforts to give back or pay forward to those who set the stage for my career early on and those who mentored, supported, or collaborated with me in the real-world context of university life. Most generally, this article provides a window into my personal journey from rural Georgia to success, “fame,” and giving back in academia.

## INTRODUCTION

I am very grateful to Tracey Meares and Robert Sampson, the co-editors of the *Annual Review of Criminology*, as well as the staff of the journal, for the opportunity to try to put into words the story of my achieving an academic career and the types of circumstances that surrounded my evolution as a professor. It is a great honor to be selected to provide this autobiographical review, recognized by Annual Reviews for my contributions to the field of criminology, and in the company of such distinguished scholars as James Short Jr., Joan McCord, and Alfred Blumstein. In the story that I tell below, readers can expect to learn more about how I came to be a professor than about what I accomplished in this role, or about the profession. I emphasize the former because (a) I have spoken and written about my accomplishments in other venues (e.g., Peterson 2012, 2017), and (b) I want to pay tribute to my family and early teachers who took for granted that I would succeed in some special way. I hope that readers of the *Annual Review of Criminology* find my story interesting and that it resonates with, and encourages or affirms, scholars whose academic journey, like mine, is/was never a sure thing.

## MY PERSPECTIVES ON MY LIFE AS AN ACADEMIC

I often think of my career as an accidental journey, whereby I happened to be in the right places at the right times. Several examples will suffice to illustrate this point.

- I moved to Cleveland, Ohio, just as both Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C) and Cleveland State University (CSU) were being established. The opening of these institutions made it possible for me to attend college; otherwise, I may never have begun the journey of becoming a professor.
- I was recruited to work as an instructional assistant at Tri-C as my first job out of college. This gave me a window into what it could be like to be a college professor, although I had no conscious thoughts of doing so.
- Just at the point that I was searching for a dissertation advisor and topic, John Hagan joined the faculty at the University of Wisconsin (UW) and gave me the opportunity to work with him on an important sentencing project.
- I joined the sociology faculty at Ohio State University (OSU) at the same time as Robert Kaufman and Lauren Krivo, setting up the opportunity for Laurie and me to develop a research partnership.

Such coincidences lead me to think of my career as quite accidental.

Yet I am equally prone to see my career path as almost predetermined. This is because, in part, I understand my journey as the outcome of what sociologists term a “self-fulfilling prophecy”<sup>1</sup> set in motion by my maternal grandfather prior to my birth. Family members took his prophecy to heart and generated activities and instilled values that indeed became real in their consequences. Over time, this indirectly led to my choice of an academic career, which did not surprise family members, even as I look back in wonder that I even went to college. I begin by describing basic details about the setting in which I grew up and my family’s situation within this setting. I then summarize my grandfather’s prophecy as told to me by family members and discuss how I see it as setting the stage for, sustaining, and shaping my career. Along the way, I reveal other aspects of my biography that shaped who I came to be and the course of my career in known and unknown ways.

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<sup>1</sup>Self-fulfilling prophecy refers to the situation where a prediction or expectation comes to fruition because one believes that it is true and takes actions that result in the expectation being realized (Merton 1996, Thomas 1967).

## AN ACADEMIC FOUNDATION LAID IN THE JIM CROW SOUTH

### My Hometown

I was born in the late 1940s and grew up during the 1950s and early 1960s in the rural Jim Crow South. My home was a small town, Fort Gaines, in southwest Georgia. Fort Gaines is the seat of Clay County and is located on the edge of the Chattahoochee River at the Alabama border. In 2017, Fort Gaines had a population of approximately 1,000 people, with a disproportionate share (approximately 80%) being African American (World Popul. Rev. 2020). When I was growing up, Fort Gaines was slightly larger, averaging around 1,300 people for the census years of 1940, 1950, and 1960 (US Census Bur. 1961). Blacks, then referred to as Negroes or coloreds in formal parlance, made up a somewhat smaller share of the population—approximately 62% of Clay County in 1960.

Although African Americans were a large share of Fort Gaines's population, not surprisingly, they had little political clout. In Clay County, segregation "was an integral part of life—Blacks had no political rights" (Hanks 1987, p. 120). In addition, Blacks in the Jim Crow South, including Fort Gaines, were socially subordinate to Whites. This subordination was enforced through rules of racial etiquette that prohibited race-mixing and required Blacks to show subservience to Whites or pay the price of potential violence, loss of employment, loss of freedom, etc. During the 1950s and 1960s, Blacks in Fort Gaines also endured precarious economic conditions (Hanks 1987). Black families were often impoverished, few were economically independent, and approximately one-third (33%) of employed Black individuals worked as farm laborers (US Census Bur. 1961). Within the Black community the social hierarchy was relatively flat. Yet school teachers, ministers, other church officials, and business owners stood apart from other groups (e.g., farm laborers, household service workers, non-church members, etc.) in terms of social esteem (Hanks 1987). This was the Southern context in which I was raised.

### My Family

My family's<sup>2</sup> situation was typical of the majority of Blacks in Fort Gaines and Clay County. We lived outside of the city limits, grew or raised much of our food, and had little in the way of luxuries or extra income. Indeed, I was well into my childhood before we had electricity or running water. My grandmother and grandfather had gone to school through the eighth and third grades, respectively. Throughout my childhood, they worked at the Columbia Peanut Mill, my grandfather as a laborer and my grandmother sorting nuts (separating edible nuts from spoiled or otherwise inedible ones). Working at this mill was seasonal (peanuts were harvested during the fall); thus, my grandparents supplemented their in-season earnings with domestic (in my grandmother's case) and/or field (e.g., chopping and picking cotton, shaking peanuts, etc.) work throughout the year, but particularly when peanuts were not being processed at the mill. In my family, and others, children engaged in field work once they were old enough to learn how to carry it out. I do not recall working in the fields very often or for sustained periods. However, at times, I must have worked right alongside other family members, as I do remember conversations about how I held my own

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<sup>2</sup>My mother was an unmarried teenager when I was born. She and I both lived with her parents (my grandparents) after my birth. During my infancy, my parents sought to marry and raise me. My grandparents agreed to the marriage, but because of my parents' youth, they would not allow the two of them to raise me on their own. Consequently, my mother and father never married one another. My mother married a few years after I was born, but I continued to live with my grandparents, as if I were the youngest of six children rather than the oldest of what eventually became five.

with my aunts and uncles in picking cotton. Specifically, my grandparents often reminisced and boasted that when I was as young as eight, my ability to pick cotton rivaled that of adults. All money earned by children for such work had to be turned over to adults to help meet ends.<sup>3</sup>

## MY GRANDFATHER'S PROPHECY

As told to me repeatedly by multiple family members, at some point during my mother's pregnancy, my grandfather proudly announced to the family that he had had a dream about the expected child. He dreamed that the new baby would be a girl, and she would become famous, "like a teacher or something." The family was struck but took the dream to heart, treating it as a good omen. Convinced that my grandfather had foretold the future, once I was born, family members took actions that I believe set me on the road to becoming a university professor. Looking back through my now sociological eyes, the vehicles through which my grandfather's prophecy was fulfilled included the ways in which family members (a) helped me acquire academic skills when I was very young; (b) encouraged and indulged my curiosity; (c) excused me from chores and other responsibilities in favor of my reading or being involved in other learning activities; and (d) paved the way for me to attend college, even when there were no visible means for doing so.

My grandmother believed in my grandfather's dream, but she was a practical person who focused on making sure that as a child of the rural South, I stayed out of trouble, especially with Whites; learned how to take care of myself, including knowing when and how to stand up for myself (and others); and became a good person with the capacity to observe the golden rule and help others. Regarding this agenda, my grandparents had their hands full, as I was a curious and feisty child who sometimes talked back to (regarded as sassing) adults.<sup>4</sup>

My mother's two younger sisters probably did the most to lay a foundation for bringing my grandfather's prophecy to fruition. They were eleven and thirteen, respectively, when I was born. They taught me to spell and read when I was a toddler and shared with me what they were learning in school. I now see their tutelage as equivalent to preschool or kindergarten. At that time, early schooling was not a stage of youth development within the context of southern rural Georgia, at least not for Blacks. Instead, children began their formal schooling around age six when they entered first grade. Several consequential results flowed from the instruction that I received from my aunts: (a) I could read earlier than many of my peers, and I entered school earlier than most children (before my fifth birthday); (b) because I was ahead of other children, after my first year of formal schooling I was moved (promoted) to fourth rather than second grade; and (c) during elementary school, teachers took a special interest in me, regarded me as smart, and provided unique opportunities for me to learn (e.g., gave me books, chances to showcase my skills, etc.).

Of note, during my primary school years, there was not a system of public elementary schools for Blacks in Fort Gaines or Clay County. Rather, a system of church schools had been set up by the Chattahoochee Association of Churches (Hanks 1987, 2007). The primary school that I attended was associated with Macedonia Baptist Church. As was typical, mine was a two-room school—first through third grade students in one room, and fourth through the highest grade (eighth, I believe, as ninth grade was the first year of high school in our system) in another

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<sup>3</sup>I vaguely recall that male and female children were treated with some inequity in this respect. For example, my uncles, but not my aunts or me, were allowed to keep at least some of the money they earned.

<sup>4</sup>I took my grandparents' teachings seriously, but doing so sometimes caused trouble for them or me. For example, I distinctly recall two separate occasions during my preteen years when I directly, and successfully, intervened in domestic violence situations between adults, one involving my mother and stepfather (my mother later divorced him). These were perilous choices on my part.

room, with just one teacher (Mr. Jones, as I recall) dividing his time between the two classrooms (Nat'l. Park Serv. 2004). By the time that I entered fifth grade, schools for Blacks in Clay County had been consolidated and a new school (Asbury Speight Elementary and High School) built. Speight housed first through twelfth grades (Speight High School existed prior to being joined with the elementary school) and is where I received the rest of my primary and secondary schooling.

Consistent with life in the Jim Crow South, where racial groups were prohibited from mixing, Speight was an all-Black setting (pupils and teachers). Our teachers had also been trained in all-Black settings.<sup>5</sup> In retrospect, I would describe some of the teaching as rote, some as providing practical knowledge (home economics, woodshop, etc.), and some as deeply analytical. Our teachers served us well. They reinforced our self-worth, tried to provide a sense of possibilities beyond those found in our everyday experiences, as when my high school homeroom teacher assured us that we were college material and should aim high, and in this segregated environment structured many opportunities for us to run things (to serve in leadership roles within the school setting). Still, my teachers did not serve as role models for my future. Despite my grandfather's prophecy, I did not have aspirations to become a teacher. And absent other middle-class role models besides preachers (who were all male), my hope for the future was to be better off than my immediate family, but with no specific ideas about how this could occur.

I graduated with honors from Asbury Speight High School on May 29, 1963.<sup>6</sup> White and Black schools were still segregated at this time, but by 1970 schools in Clay County, Georgia, were formally integrated. One day after my high school graduation, I boarded a bus for Cleveland, Ohio, and never returned to Georgia to live. My migration to Cleveland was a continuation of my family's "Great Migration" to the North, including both of the aunts who had been my first teachers.<sup>7</sup> They were now married and had young children. I moved into the household of the older of the two, with her husband and their two children. Together, my aunts had plans to help me get started in the adult phase of my life, although I was still only 16 years old.

## LIVING AND LEARNING IN CLEVELAND

My first year in Cleveland was a major adjustment period. There were no formal rules of racial etiquette. Blacks were not banned from sharing public accommodations (e.g., public transportation, lunch counters, recreational facilities, etc.). Thus, I had to become accustomed to interacting with Whites in what seemed to be a wholly different way and to conquer my underlying fear of undue repercussions that might result from missteps during these interactions. As a rural southern Black, I assumed that integration was the norm in the urban North. I gradually became aware that the absence of de jure segregation does not mean that all is well; de facto segregation is also real segregation. I rode the same buses as Whites, but we got off at different places; we could be served at the same lunch counters, but we shopped and ate at different places; and we could work in the same settings, but Whites held the better paying and more prestigious jobs. I observed such

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<sup>5</sup>The largest share of our teachers received their college education at Historically Black Colleges (e.g., Albany State College, Fort Valley State College, Morris Brown College, and the Tuskegee Institute) and Universities (e.g., Atlanta University, now Clark Atlanta University, Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, Shaw University).

<sup>6</sup>Although I had gotten off to a stellar start, I was neither valedictorian nor salutatorian of my graduating class. These honors went to very bright young women who already had college-educated family members.

<sup>7</sup>Coincidentally, my father's family had also migrated to Cleveland. This provided an opportunity for me to get to know him and my paternal grandmother. Although they had not been a regular part of my life, they seemed to share the expectation that I would do well.

patterns but did not always think through their implications. Eventually, the Hough area riots and other protest activities (e.g., marches with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.) in Cleveland provided a corrective to my naïve notions about race relations and integration “up north.” Fortuitously, much later, my research would address how, why, and with what consequences segregation plays a role in crime across all types of US cities.

My aunts kept their promise to help me get started in my new hometown. Each of them agreed to contribute to expenses for any training that I needed and to provide in-kind help as required. On my part, I would have to work at least part-time to help support myself. I began the job search immediately; in the meantime, I babysat for one or both aunts while they worked. I soon found a job working at the lunch counter in S. S. Kresge’s discount department store in downtown Cleveland.<sup>8</sup> Eventually, my aunts and I discussed the possibility of my becoming a practical nurse. We learned of a training program that would take approximately nine months. I would have to live in a dormitory with other trainees, a requirement that I found intriguing. Another criterion involved taking and passing an aptitude test regarding suitability for the profession. I actually failed this test, bringing to an end my pursuit of work in the medical field.

Perhaps from a notice in the local news, during that first year, I learned about the opening of a new college, Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C), which would offer two types of programs: (a) two-year professional programs for people who were seeking skills’ training for existing jobs and (b) two-year programs in liberal arts for individuals who would eventually seek bachelor’s degrees. The tuition was affordable (about \$10 per semester hour for Cuyahoga County residents). I spoke with my aunts about the possibility of enrolling in this new college. They agreed that it might be a good fit for me and that each of them would pay a portion of the tuition. I would continue to live with my aunt, take the bus back and forth to the college, and work at Kresge’s. Following from these conversations, I applied to Tri-C, was accepted, and enrolled during the second semester of the college’s first year (spring, 1964). Attending this junior college proved to be a key to my future and the realization of my grandfather’s dream. At Tri-C, I embraced sociology as a discipline, rekindled my love of learning, and acquired my first academic role models and mentors. Still, I was not yet consciously aware of moving in the direction of teaching. My goals were to get through the program successfully, transfer to another new local college, Cleveland State University, that would open in the fall of 1964, and thereby acquire a college degree. I did not really think about what kind of employment would flow from having the degree.

I matriculated to Tri-C with a bit of trepidation. Despite being considered as college material by high school teachers and smart by family members, I held stereotypes about how much better public schools were “up north” than “down south.” Therefore, I assumed that I would likely not be able to keep pace with my Ohio colleagues. All I had in my favor was the ability to work hard and the motivation to make up any deficits that I had. In fact, I did keep pace with my northern counterparts; also, I made a positive impression on a number of instructors. Perhaps two features of my community college experience propelled me along and toward an academic career. First was the combination of identifying a subject matter that resonated with me, and taking classes with instructors who inspired me and whose teaching skills I came to admire, namely Mr. Harold Gaines (my first Black faculty, who seemed to really enjoy teaching), Dr. Faye Tyler Norton (a psychology professor and department chair, who took a personal interest in my well-being), and Ms. Jane Prather (who taught introductory sociology and had a knack for linking the theoretical with very relevant everyday examples: Prather eventually received her PhD in Sociology from the University of California, Berkeley and taught for years in the California State University System). Second was a set of structural factors related to attending the community college during the

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<sup>8</sup>Kresge’s was the type of discount department store sometimes referred to as a five-and-dime store.

mid-1960s. I arrived in Cleveland and at Tri-C during the Civil Rights Movement and the implementation of President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society.<sup>9</sup> The economy was also expanding, and resources were made available to help rectify some of the problems associated with poverty and de jure segregation. My aunts dutifully paid tuition for my first semester at Tri-C. But once enrolled, I learned about my eligibility for Grants-in-Aid through President Johnson's programs. I applied for and received such aid for the remainder of my time at Tri-C. I was also provided a work-study job at the college, which I now regard as my first white-collar job (at least compared to picking cotton and serving at a lunch counter). I worked as a switchboard operator for the college and as a clerical assistant to Dr. Norton, the above-noted psychology professor who chaired the Behavioral Science department where sociology and other social science disciplines were housed. I nonetheless retained my job at Kresge's. Here, the fact that I was attending college came to the attention of the store manager, who immediately moved me from the lunch counter to the check-out cash register. Although this was a small gesture of recognition, at the time it felt like a promotion and gave me a concrete sense of how education may be related to preferential outcomes.

I completed my Associate of Arts degree at Tri-C in the spring of 1966 and walked away with new knowledge, new skills, a sense of new possibilities, and a desire to continue working toward a bachelor's degree. However, I did not transfer to CSU immediately. I no longer relied on my aunts for college funds, and, as such, I decided that I should work for a while and build up a little nest egg for tuition and fees as it would cost more to attend CSU than Tri-C. I learned that the United States Postal Service sometimes hired college students during the summer. Therefore, I applied for a job, took the required test, and became a postal clerk. This was a good-paying job compared to others I had held. There was one major problem: I was assigned to the second shift at the downtown post office, but I did not have reliable transportation for getting home around midnight (buses to my aunt's area stopped running before midnight and I did not have a car). Initially, I paid a coworker, who was picked up by her husband, to drop me off at my home, but they turned out to be unreliable. I began to take the rapid transit home, but the closest stop was a mile from my aunt's house, requiring me to walk the remaining distance. One troublesome incident prompted me to give up my "good-paying" postal clerk job.

One evening I got off the transit and began the walk home. Along the route, I passed a tavern, after which I could hear the footsteps of someone walking behind me. As I continued to walk, nervously now, a lone male in a car pulled alongside me and offered me a ride, commenting that I was not safe, nodding toward the person walking behind me. I was afraid to take the offer of a ride; after all, he was a stranger. But I feared equally the person who was walking behind me. I chose the ride and was taken directly home without incident. I thanked the driver for the ride and my safety that evening and took the experience as a warning that working second shift at the post office was not a good idea, even if the pay was reasonable. My next job hunt landed me work as a bank teller. The position did not pay as well as being a postal clerk, but I was able to work during the day when the buses were running. It had the added benefit of being a job that I could hold part-time while attending college. I saved money, applied for admission to CSU, applied for financial support and work-study, and headed back to college.

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<sup>9</sup>The Great Society was a set of programs put in place by President Johnson during the mid-1960s aimed at, among other goals, eliminating poverty and racial injustice. Doing so involved undertaking broad initiatives to directly affect these conditions, such as instituting a "war on poverty" and implementing economic opportunity and civil rights legislation. It also involved developing programs and reforms to address educational and other inequities that underlie or are otherwise associated with poverty and racial inequality. For example, enactment of the Higher Education Act provided for scholarships, low-interest loans, federal grants, and the like to make attending college accessible to all populations, including those from low-income and minority backgrounds.



I had come to love sociology during my time at Tri-C. Thus, I declared sociology as my major and began to complete the requirements for my bachelor's degree. Once again, the courses resonated with me, especially those that had to do with social inequality or law and justice. I was more and more intrigued by the substance of what I was learning. I also again encountered faculty who impressed me with their knowledge, assignments, and manner of teaching. Dr. Mareyjoyce Green became my newest role model. She was the second African-American faculty that I encountered; her courses were on the sociology of poverty and the sociology of education. She assigned the best books (classic and contemporary) and called on us to complete assignments that brought the academic and real worlds together. Furthermore, she had a mission to improve the academic experiences of women students and faculty, eventually establishing CSU's Women's Center, now known as the Mareyjoyce Green Women's Center. My intellectual curiosity was also piqued by courses on stratification and my work-study job. Social stratification was taught by Professor Albert Cousins, who was also my work-study supervisor. He planned to write a book on stratification in the United States. My job was to identify and summarize library materials on slavery in the United States as a system of stratification. This assignment taught me a great deal about US slavery and its legacy for contemporary Black America. Learning about slavery was very eye-opening because despite growing up in the heart of the South, I learned nothing about slavery during elementary or high school and nothing much about Black History in general. My reaction to what I learned from my work-study assignment was both intellectual and visceral. The visceral component stayed with me a long time and may be partly responsible for my long-term interest in inequality, albeit with respect to crime and justice.

At CSU, I also encountered my first and most serious non-subtle form of racism within the academy while pursuing my bachelor's degree. This came from a faculty member who taught Comparative Societies, one of a limited number of advanced courses for sociology majors. The primary assignment for the course was to write a paper that compares and contrasts a US institution (education, family, religion, etc.) with the same institution in a different society. However, from the outset and throughout the course, the instructor made fun of certain societies (especially African countries) and made it clear that these societies were "backward" and should not be considered in choosing among places to study. Hardly a class period went by without the professor, and one or more of his favorite students, making disparaging comments about backward societies or backward people, which I believed he considered me to be. Nonetheless, I did not feel free to drop the class because inevitably I would have to take at least one course from this professor. I survived the class by choosing one of his favorite European societies to write about and relying on some of his favorite sources. Apart from making progress toward my degree, this was an important moment in my academic career, as it brought home to me that northern educational settings are not exempt from racially biased people, structures, or processes. I also realized that although I had been raised to be a problem solver, adjusting my work to meet racist expectations would never work; it gives in to the racism, and it does not fix the hurt and lasting harm from micro- and macro-aggressions that strike at the core of one's personal and intellectual being. I would have to find a more constructive approach.

## **TO AND FROM CUYAHOGA COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY**

During my senior year at CSU, I ran completely out of money. However, I was saved from having to drop out by my knack for being in the right place at the right time. I learned from other students-of-color about a nearby Presbyterian Church that would pay tuition for students from the inner city in exchange for service on weekends working with preschool and elementary children.

I applied, was accepted, and participated in the program for the duration of my time in college. I graduated from CSU in the summer of 1969 with a bachelor's degree in sociology. I expected at this point to find a job in the social service area, but, as luck would have it, Dr. Norton, my former work-study supervisor and mentor from Tri-C, had kept abreast of my whereabouts and invited me back to Tri-C to take a position as a Professional Instructional Assistant. This position was similar to being a full-time graduate assistant in that the work involved assisting instructors in preparing materials, grading, and engaging with students to help them succeed in their courses (addressing questions, tutoring, etc.). I accepted the position and stepped back into the academic arena with the recognition that I was likely stepping in for the long haul. Still, it did not occur to me that this was another step toward becoming a "teacher or something."

I worked at TRI-C as a professional assistant for the next three years. The work was enjoyable, paid relatively well, and had good benefits. I met interesting people and became more aware of the many options and professions that could flow from having a college degree. I also progressed into a more adult lifestyle, e.g., moving out of my aunt's home, getting married, and establishing a household. Still, after a couple of years, this role began to seem routine, and I began to realize that my sociological knowledge base was still limited. I started to consider acquiring credentials for college-level teaching. Even then, I did not envision becoming a university professor; I simply wanted to be able to teach at TRI-C.

Around this time, CSU was starting to develop some graduate programs, including a master's degree in sociology. Therefore, in the fall of 1971, I returned to CSU to acquire a graduate degree. I was in their first class, which consisted of four female students. In this context, I got to know Dr. Butler Jones, who was now chairing CSU's sociology department. His specializations were race and ethnicity and sociology of law. He was now my third African-American professor, and perhaps the most erudite person that I have ever been exposed to. I was taken with his level of knowledge and the way that he melded his two specializations—bringing together his views of how issues of race/ethnicity intersect with issues of law and legal policy. I now wanted to "be like Butler." William Bailey had also joined CSU's faculty by then; he brought to the department a focus on crime and delinquency, which I also found interesting. Dr. Bailey was trained in a traditional sociology graduate program at Washington State University, with people like Jim Short as his professors. He brought to CSU an emphasis on contributions to research and moving your research from working projects to professional presentations and published articles. Through his tutelage, I learned a great deal about criminological theories and research and was able to develop a thesis project (Peterson 1973), turn it into a professional presentation (Peterson Lott & Bailey 1975), and, in turn, a publication (Bailey & Peterson Lott 1976). This gave me a new appreciation for the work of university professors.

I received my master's degree from CSU in the summer of 1973, after which I secured my goal of a faculty position at Tri-C and joined my former colleagues. Although rewarding, this stage of my career lasted for only three years. Once again, I realized the limitations of my knowledge and decided that it was time to return to school to acquire a doctoral degree. I had in mind applying to places with two main characteristics: (a) location in a warm climate (having grown up in Southwest Georgia, I had still not yet acclimated to Cleveland winters) and (b) the possibility of pursuing a PhD and law degree simultaneously. I developed a list of programs that fit these criteria and spoke with Butler Jones about my plans. He indicated that none of the universities on my list had a strong general sociology program and recommended that I apply to a few additional schools, including the University of Wisconsin (UW) and perhaps the University of Michigan, both of which had excellent general sociology programs that would allow me to choose among specializations if sociology of law turned out not to be my forte. I accepted his advice. I also applied for support from the American Sociological Association (ASA), which had recently begun a

Minority Fellowship Program (MFP) to support underrepresented students who were pursuing graduate degrees in sociology. I received a letter of acceptance into the sociology program from UW during the same week as I received notice that I had been accepted into ASA's MFP. I took this coincidence as a good omen, similar to the way that my family had taken my grandfather's dream, and accepted both.

## ON WISCONSIN

On Wisconsin,<sup>10</sup> when I arrived in Madison in the fall of 1976 to start working toward my PhD, I brought with me two fears. My first fear was that I might freeze to death. This move was farther north than Cleveland, and the winters were even colder than in Ohio. Upon arrival, I asked myself why I had not followed my inclination to move to a warmer climate. Second, despite having been accepted into UW's program and having received a fellowship from ASA, I now feared that I would not be able to hold my own with the mainly White students who I assumed were from elite undergraduate and master's programs. After all, this was a major national program, and my training and experience to date had been confined to start-up colleges and universities. Consistent with Butler Jones' assessment, I found UW's program to be broad and robust. Both faculty and graduate students seemed to walk, talk, and breathe sociology. Furthermore, people, including numerous graduate students, often had unique expertise regarding particular theories, methods, or statistics. Thus, even some graduate students served as mini-consultants to those who needed tutelage on given topics. My anxiety was furthered by the fact that because I already had a master's degree when I entered the program, I would be expected to take preliminary exams (otherwise known as qualifying or candidacy exams) early on.

Of course, neither of my fears was realized. I survived the colder climate even though my first winter (1976–1977) was the third coldest in Madison's history. I considered not staying for the second year, but by now was driven to achieve the PhD. I also met the standards of the rigorous program. I shushed my fears by (a) retaking tool-area courses (statistics, research methods, etc.) to remain confident in what I knew and (b) taking my first preliminary exam in a specialization (Deviance and Social Control) rather than a required area. I passed my first preliminary examination and then specialized in crime and justice. This choice was later reinforced when John Hagan joined the faculty at Wisconsin for several years. He brought Celesta Albonetti (a graduate student with special statistical expertise) with him. In preparing for the preliminary exam, I had become familiar with Hagan's work. He was probably the leading scholar on race and criminal justice and had recently provided a comprehensive review of race and criminal sentencing research (Hagan 1974). This review led Hagan to recommend that to resolve questions about race and the sentencing process, scholars need to take into account the organizational context of courts, community settings, and the movement of processes across different levels of analysis. In his own work, Hagan was attempting to identify, operationalize, and take these constructs into account. Notably, together with Albonetti and colleagues at the University of Indiana, he was embarking on a major project examining the social context of federal sentencing decisions.

When John and I discussed the possibility of him serving as my dissertation advisor, he invited me to join the sentencing project. I did so and developed a dissertation examining the social context of drug sentencing (Peterson 1983). This was a great learning experience for me, and my dissertation served all the purposes that I now advise graduate students that one's thesis should serve: elevating one into an expert on a specific topic; getting one out of graduate school; helping

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<sup>10</sup>Not coincidentally, *On Wisconsin* is the title of the university's fight song and its alumni magazine.

one to land his/her first academic appointment as an assistant professor; and yielding one's first publications as new faculty (e.g., Peterson 1985, Peterson & Hagan 1984). However, even as I was completing my dissertation, I was only barely conscious of moving toward the destiny that my grandfather had set in place. For example, I did little to put myself on the job market. My focus was on finishing the dissertation, not finding a job. Fortunately, as my advisor, John had a plan. During the summer of my final year, he called me into his office to discuss my future. His main question was whether there were areas of the country where I would not want to live. Having become accustomed to living in "integrated" contexts, I answered that I did not want to return to the South. He nodded and asked other questions, most of which I do not recall. Once his questions were answered, he noted that I should update my curriculum vitae (CV), as he would be preparing letters of introduction for me and would need to send my CV along.<sup>11</sup> I did so and went back to writing without worrying much about whether I would have the opportunity to interview for a job. But such an opportunity came my way pretty early during the fall of 1981. Ultimately, I was offered a position at the University of Iowa (UI) in early November, with a short window to respond. As a place to live, Iowa City seemed a bit too rural and a bit too White for my newly acquired tastes. However, I accepted the position on the advice of faculty at Wisconsin that your first job should be a good fit for your training and one from which you could move.

Along with accomplishing a meaningful dissertation, my time at Wisconsin also served to (a) turn me into a research-oriented scholar thanks much to John Hagan, Celesta Albonetti, Frances Kunreuther, and others participating in the deviance and social control area; (b) started me on my way to playing leadership roles in academic organizations (e.g., professional associations); (c) hooked me up with a number of people who became friends for life (e.g., Celesta Albonetti, Robert Kaufman, Ok-Jie Lee, Maxine Thompson); and (d) made me realize that the "being a teacher" part of my grandfather's prophecy had come to fruition. In the afternoon, following my dissertation defense, I called my grandfather (my grandmother had died during my first year at Wisconsin). I told him that I had just passed my dissertation defense and that people now call me Dr. Peterson. He did not say much; instead, he began to laugh, and I joined in. Before hanging up, I told him that I was about to begin teaching at the University of Iowa. I did not try to tell him what it meant to be a university professor. He had his understanding of being a teacher, and he understood that I would not be teaching at the elementary or high school level. I knew from the nature of his laughter that he was proud and very pleased. In turn, I was proud and pleased that I had done my part to help fulfill his prophecy. It had been a long time in coming; that curious and feisty young girl from Fort Gaines, Georgia, was now 35 years old.

## **FINALLY, A PROFESSOR**

I got off to a good start at UI. A central paper from my dissertation was published in sociology's premier journal (Peterson & Hagan 1984); I established good relationships with my colleagues and became lasting friends with Marvin Krohn; I taught courses that fit with my training and worked one-on-one with several undergraduate students on honors projects. One of them was the late Chester Britt. Chet eventually received his PhD in sociology and succeeded in working his way through the ranks of the profession, including serving as Dean of the School of Criminal Justice at Northeastern University. I also learned some hard lessons about university and faculty politics as a young (career-wise) faculty member at Iowa. These experiences have proven helpful in my own work with junior faculty (see discussion below).

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<sup>11</sup>I never asked but assumed that this approach was the way that job searches were handled in the Canadian system where John was trained and received his PhD.

Ultimately, because Iowa City seemed small and homogeneous, I decided to go back on the job market, landing a position in the department of sociology at Ohio State University (OSU) during my third year at Iowa. OSU was an attractive setting for me because it had an established program in criminology, with a component in sociology of law, and because it was near Cleveland, where my aunts still lived along with my uncles, one sister, and many first cousins. I began my tenure at Ohio State in the summer of 1985 as part of a cohort of three new faculty members: myself; Robert Kaufman, a stratification and statistics expert whom I knew from graduate school at UW; and Lauren Krivo, a demographer who I did not know at the time. The three of us hit it off, provided support for one another, and Laurie and I became research partners. Our partnership drew on (a) Laurie's demographic skill set and her understanding of general theories of race and the sources and consequences of residential segregation and (b) my knowledge of crime theories and expertise on inequality in crime and justice. We began by developing a paper on the role of racial residential segregation in the differential levels of Black homicide across US cities (Peterson & Krivo 1993). This led to other papers and eventually to a program of research oriented to providing critical tests of unequal levels of street crime among groups and communities of different colors. The collaboration was very fruitful, yielding important findings for the discipline and leading to other important shared activities, most notably, Director (yours truly) and Associate Director (Krivo) of OSU's Criminal Justice Research Center (CJRC) and cofounding (with others) and coordinating the activities of a mentoring organization—the Racial Democracy, Crime and Justice Network (RDCJN) (see below).

I moved through the ranks at Ohio State in a relatively straightforward manner with the exception of one major incident related to my tenure decision. The problem was not the amount or quality of my work—all assessments of my work were positive. Rather, a rift between my Chair and me surfaced when a senior professor-of-color, whom I had developed a friendship with, disrupted the tenure meeting of another junior colleague, arguing that I also deserved to be tenured and promoted at this time. My Chair believed that I had conspired with my senior colleague to have him disrupt the meeting to make this case; this was not true. When my friend told me what he had done, just before the Chair showed up at my office door, I was surprised, dismayed, and concerned about what punishment I would bear for this mess. The Chair was very angry with both of us and mentioned putting me up for tenure on affirmative action grounds. I argued against this, reminding him that each year he had written very positive evaluations regarding my contributions to research, teaching, and service and that I had not requested an early tenure evaluation. Still, I took his initial words as a threat and decided to respond positively to a department that was trying to recruit me. I went to the interview and received a viable offer. Ultimately, I decided not to leave OSU because my family was nearby and I had just begun collaborating with Laurie. Instead, my Chair and I negotiated the outcome of my tenure; I underwent a very abbreviated formal process, which started at the college level rather than the department level.<sup>12</sup>

## BEING FAMOUS? DOING GOOD?

Clearly, my grandfather's prophecy regarding my becoming a teacher (or something) has been realized. But did I achieve fame as he expected? I believe that if he understood how academia works, my grandfather would be satisfied that I have achieved a modicum of fame, as evidenced by the

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<sup>12</sup>For years I was embarrassed about this incident. I now regularly discuss it to point out to young scholars that troubling politics may come from unexpected places. However, you do not have to be brought down by them if you have your ducks in a row. My mantra is: Find the joy in your work and use it to keep on rolling so that you are prepared for whatever surfaces.

(a) visibility and influence of my work (see discussion below); (b) offices that I have held (e.g., Program Chair for the 50th Anniversary Meeting of the American Society of Criminology (ASC), President of the ASC, Director of the Race and Ethnicity Research Program Area for the National Consortium on Violence Research (NCOVR), Chair of the Advisory Board of the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR), Vice Chair of the Committee on Law and Justice (CLAJ) of the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine (NASEM); (c) opportunities that I forewent, most notably, nomination to serve as Director of the National Institute of Justice; and (d) awards that I received for research contributions and service to the field (e.g., ASC's Edwin Sutherland Award, the Coramae Richey Mann Award—ASC's Division on People of Color and Crime, CSU's Distinguished Alumni Award, Distinguished Professor of Social and Behavioral Sciences at OSU, OSU's Faculty Award for Distinguished University Service, and lifetime appointment as a National Associate of the National Research Council, NASEM). The remainder of this review points briefly to the types of substantive contributions that I have made and ends by noting activities that I believe would make my grandmother nod with approval, as they suggest that I have also been mindful of her teachings to be a good person, contributing to the well-being of others when positioned to do so.

### Substantive Research Contributions

As a sociological criminologist, I have made contributions to three areas of research, although an underlying feature of all my work is a focus on the social context of inequality in crime and justice. First, following from my master's thesis, and in collaboration with William Bailey, my early work explored in what contexts and for what groups punishment, especially capital punishment, has a deterrent influence on crime (e.g., Bailey & Peterson 1991; Peterson & Bailey 1988, 1991, 2003). For a number of years, our research provided the primary evidence on capital punishment as a deterrent to murder. We found little confirmation that capital punishment, measured in a variety of ways, is significantly associated with rates of a variety of types of murder in any context. About the time that Bailey and I wrote our last article, a new brand of capital punishment and deterrence studies was beginning to surface (e.g., Dezhbakhsh et al. 2003, Shepherd 2004). This work was grounded in economics rather than sociology and provided more evidence for deterrence than sociologically grounded studies. However, the economics-based studies were heavily critiqued in terms of their underlying assumptions and methodologies (Donohue & Wolfers 2005, Fagan 2006).

A second set of contributions followed from my dissertation and related research on inequality in sentencing (e.g., Peterson 1985, 1988; Peterson & Hagan 1984). Relying on data from Hagan's federal sentencing project, I assessed variability in the links between race and sentence outcomes imposed on drug offenders in the Southern Federal District of New York over several time periods that involved different definitions of the nature of the drug-crime problem. My work demonstrated that the meaning of race varies across settings and over time, with patterns of sentences being more or less severe for Blacks compared to Whites, depending on the meaning attached to race during the period. Thus, my work made it clear that studies of racial differences in sentencing should take into account the racial meaning attached to the particular social and criminal justice contexts in which defendants are processed. Doing so may yield patterns of leniency or severity for racially subordinate groups compared to their more privileged White counterparts. Studies relying on more simplistic conceptualizations of race are unable to account for apparently anomalous findings of more lenient sentences for racially subordinate groups. Following from this and related research (e.g., Hagan & Bumiller 1983), sentencing scholars became more attentive to the social context of sentencing.

The work that I undertook with Laurie Krivo on inequality in crime levels across groups and communities of different colors provides my most fundamental contributions to criminology. We called on researchers to embed their analyses of race/ethnic differences in crime rates in an understanding of broader structural arrangements of society and to avoid conducting studies that compare broad groupings of Whites versus non-Whites (i.e., Blacks, Latinxs, etc.) with one another. Instead, it is important to conduct investigations that compare racially distinct but economically similar groups and communities (Krivo & Peterson 1996, 2000). Of note, our call came near the same time as Sampson & Wilson's (1995) watershed piece encouraging scholars to examine the role of structural differentiation in generating crime levels across communities of different colors in the interest of determining whether racially distinct communities with structurally comparable conditions have similar levels of crime. Our work speaks directly to this issue.

To provide critical tests of our questions, we assembled crime and socioeconomic data for a representative sample of nearly 10,000 neighborhoods (i.e., census tracts) in 91 large cities across the United States, now known as the National Neighborhood Crime Study (NNCS). Utilizing these data, Laurie and I demonstrated that (a) because of segregation and related processes, race/ethnic neighborhoods diverge substantially in their structural characteristics; (b) these differences in structural conditions, especially socioeconomic disadvantage, are the underlying processes that contribute to differences in crime across neighborhoods of different colors (e.g., Krivo et al. 2009, Peterson & Krivo 2010, Saporu et al. 2011); and (c) therefore, when Black, White, Latinx, minority, and integrated neighborhoods are similar in levels of disadvantage, residential instability, neighborhood investments, and spatial context, they are also similar in their levels of crime. This is not apparent from general racial differences in crime studies because typical studies tend not to compare structurally similar types of racially and ethnically distinct neighborhoods.

### **Paying Forward and Giving Back: Broader Contributions**

Although others sought to help me acquire good academic skills, my grandmother made sure that I became a good person, one who follows the golden rule and tries to give as she gets. As it turns out, among the privileges of being a professor, especially post-tenure, are opportunities to make contributions beyond your research. Above I pointed to some of the roles that I played in academic organizations. These were mostly at the request of others. My grandmother had in mind a more voluntary kind of giving—seeing a need/problem and remedying the situation. From this vantage point, I believe that she would be pleased regarding several activities that I have undertaken.

Most notably, I have devoted considerable time to working with young (career-wise) scholars from underrepresented groups in ways that my grandmother would easily recognize as “seeing a problem and trying to fix it.” Specifically, in carrying out my NCOVR responsibilities, I became aware that younger scholars from underrepresented groups often feel/are isolated in their work and find it difficult to overcome what they are isolated from, i.e., resources, relevant information, sponsorship, and other means necessary for success in academia. This seemed to me to be a fixable problem, but we needed a vehicle for thinking through how to solve it. Conversations with Laurie and other colleagues led us to seek funding from the National Science Foundation (NSF) for a series of workshops centered on the status of research on race, ethnicity, crime, and criminal justice. We received the grant and held the first of three workshops in the spring of 2003. The ultimate outcome was the founding of the RDCJN,<sup>13</sup> with the twofold mission of (a) advancing

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<sup>13</sup>The founding of the RDCJN was a group effort. Laurie and I led the way, but the initial “think tank” also included people such as Robert Crutchfield, John Hagan, Karen Heimer, Ramiro Martinez, Ross Matsueda, Jody Miller, María Vélez, Geoff Ward, and Marjorie Zatz.



research on issues of citizenship and democratic participation at the intersection of race, crime, and justice and (b) promoting racial/ethnic democratization of academia by supporting junior scholars of color (racial/ethnic minorities) in advancing their academic careers. Laurie and I served as co-coordinators of this group from 2003–2015, when network activities were moved to Rutgers University under the auspices of Rod Brunson and Jody Miller.

To date, the RDCJN includes approximately 200 diverse scholars. Our primary form of support for young scholars is through a three-week Crime and Justice Summer Research Institute (SRI) with the following features: support of the work needed to bring a research paper/proposal to submission readiness; participation in a series of professional development workshops that serve as a toolkit of information for managing the academic environment; provision of opportunities to build networks with one another; facilitation of individuals' progress by senior scholars who serve as reviewers of papers/proposals or mentors; presentation and acceptance of feedback on papers/proposals during the end-of-institute RDCJN workshop; and integration into the larger network of the RDCJN upon completion of the SRI. The SRI has been quite successful. We have "graduated" 113 young faculty and will have at least two additional cohorts (eight faculty per SRI). Young faculty credit the project with helping them achieve their career goals. Most of the projects worked on during the Institute are successfully published or funded; most of the Fellows who have applied for tenure have received it along with promotion to associate professor; some have gone on to become full professors, and a few have served as department chair or dean of their school/college. Importantly, numerous collaborative projects have resulted from participation in the SRI and RDCJN, and Fellows are gaining national and university-level awards, grants, etc. Overall, the promise of reducing isolation and otherwise supporting underrepresented scholars is paying off quite well.<sup>14</sup>

Second, I have put forth effort to enhance resources for examining issues related to understudied and underrepresented populations. For example, as Chair of the Advisory Council of ICPSR, I advocated for the development of an archive that would house data relevant for conducting research on diverse race and ethnic groups similar to those available for various other topics. Currently referred to as the Resource Center for Minority Data (RCMD), such an archive was established at ICPSR in the early 2000s. To set a good example and practice what I preached, Laurie and I deposited the above-noted NNCS data at the RCMD. We also encouraged colleagues in the RDCJN to follow suit.

Relatedly, when Laurie and I were bringing our NNCS work to a close and I was retiring from OSU, I recommended to her that we consider identifying younger scholars within the RDCJN to undertake an NNCS2 data collection. My thinking was that a second wave of data would be a major resource for answering a host of unanswered questions about changes in the relationship between neighborhood structural conditions and neighborhood crime levels across communities of different colors. Laurie agreed to this possibility but decided to lead the project herself. She, along with María Vélez and Christopher Lyons, have recently completed assembling the NNCS2. It will eventually be made publicly available, hopefully through the RCMD.

As a third example, as Vice-Chair of CLAJ, I advocated for a comprehensive consensus study on race/ethnicity, crime, and justice, which would inform researchers and policymakers regarding

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<sup>14</sup>It is important to note that our approach to young faculty is not based on the idea that they have deficiencies in their training or background. Rather, we assume that real or felt isolation results in individuals not always having access to information required for success or not knowing where to turn to gain needed help. Our program provides them with tools to address such problems. Fortunately, Patricia White, then Sociology Program Chair at the NSF, and her Law and Social Sciences' counterparts, saw and understood our vision from the outset. I am grateful to all these colleagues, and especially Dr. White, for their continuous support of, and feedback on, our work.



the state of knowledge on this topic. Such a study has not yet come to fruition. However, the current Chair of CLAJ, Robert Crutchfield, has included consideration of such a project on his agenda. Hopefully, a consensus study of the sort I proposed will be undertaken under his auspices.

Another of my giving-back missions has been to bring the research contributions of under-represented scholars, and their value, to the attention of other mainstream criminologists. I have done so in two ways. First, I have been very inclusive in roles that have required me to put together speaker series, such as those associated with the work of the CJRC at OSU; workshops, such as those associated with the RDCJN; and conferences, such as presidential plenaries and thematic sessions associated with the ASC program for my presidential year (2016) as well as in the edited volumes and journal issues that I helped to develop (e.g., Krivo & Peterson 2009, Peterson et al. 2006, Peterson et al. 2018). Second, on two occasions, when I have had the undivided attention of hundreds of influential criminologists (i.e., delivering the Edwin Sutherland address at the 2012 ASC meeting and the Presidential address during the 2016 ASC meeting), I have used the podium to highlight, celebrate, and speak to the value of the contributions of underrepresented scholars for improving our understanding of crime and criminal justice issues (see Peterson 2012, 2017). Of course, my grandmother could not have anticipated the nature of the problems that I would identify and try to help solve. Still, I think that she would be quite proud of the above-noted efforts on my part. I know that she would be as pleased by such honors as the “Most Supportive Faculty Award,” the establishment of the Peterson and Krivo Mentoring Award, and the Peterson Fellows for Racial and Ethnic Diversity Award as she would be by my scholarly accomplishments. In my mind’s eyes and ears, I can see her smile and hear her say, “Well done, Ruth Delois,” which is the name she used for me when she was really pleased with something I had done or, conversely, when she was really displeased with something I had done.

## A FINAL NOTE

In November 2011, I retired from my faculty position at Ohio State University. It was a good ride, but it is unlikely that I will continue to make substantive contributions as an emerita. My hope is that I have contributed to a foundation that others can build upon. I do plan to continue my work with young scholars. I am still involved with the RDCJN, and recently proposed and helped to establish a development program for ASC’s Peterson Fellows for Racial and Ethnic Diversity.

In general, I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to engage and succeed in an academic career; I proudly refer to myself as a criminologist. Whatever my grandfather’s motivation for reporting his dream that fateful morning, it led to a welcome career for me. I am grateful to members of my family for taking my grandfather’s dream seriously, and to the many teachers at Macedonia Church School and Asbury Speight Elementary and High School for their dedication and for their success in imparting to us knowledge by rote, through practice, and through meaningful analysis that enlightened us and gave us tools for succeeding in our careers and in life.

I am also grateful for all those acts of serendipity that afforded me opportunities to interact with strangers who became mentors, advisors, colleagues, collaborators, students, friends, and the like. As well, I appreciate the chance outcome that my career bridges two different cohorts of very active crime and justice scholars: the one whose age group I fall into and the one, ten years younger, with whom I received my PhD. I have worked with and benefitted from members of both these groups. The list is far too long for me to name all the individuals whose paths have crossed mine and who have made a difference in my career. I hope that I have thanked each of you at some point and that you know who you are. It takes multiple villages to ensure one’s success in a career as a sociological criminologist. I am very appreciative of the several villages, and individuals within them, that have facilitated my career success or nurtured me through the process.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author is not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

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I hope that throughout this article, I have made it clear that I am very grateful to a host of people and organizational entities for the learning that I achieved through them and for their support, advice, encouragement, and untold other contributions to my career success and my journey through life. Of course, time and space do not allow me to “speak the names” of all the family members, elementary and secondary school teachers, university colleagues, mentors, collaborators, students, friends, and the like that have been difference-makers in my career and life. But I do not take such help and support for granted. On the contrary, I feel very privileged to have had such giving folks to count on from before birth and thereafter.

I am able to speak the names of certain people who were involved in bringing this article to fruition. First, I am grateful to Co-Editors Tracy Meares and Robert Sampson for the opportunity to reflect on and write about my life and career. Second, although I do not know all of their names, I very much appreciate the work that the *Annual Review of Criminology* staff has undertaken on my behalf. Besides Tracy and Rob, for me, Absolom Hagg is the face of the *Annual Review of Criminology*. I offer a special shout out to him for the gracious and reassuring way that he shepherded me through the process from the initial request through the final editing. Lastly, I am grateful to several of my best friends forever (John Hagan, Robert Kaufman, Laurie Krivo, Katheryn Russell-Brown, and Maxine Thompson) for reading early drafts, providing feedback, and offering encouragement, this time and every time. Thank you all.

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