

Five Reasons Why I Agree with Gil Geis: Publish with Your Students

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I was deeply saddened by the passing of Gilbert Geis. I am proud to count myself among Gil's 124 coauthors. I am also privileged to know many of his coauthors, including Henry Pontell and Mary Dodge, with whom I shared our mutual grief at Gil's death when we met at the 2012 American Society of Criminology conference. As I think of that moment, I am reminded that one way that Gil's influence was felt was through the scholarly networks he helped to create, which were importantly nourished by his co-authorship with its members. Henry, Mary, and I were part of that network.

In fact, as I read Gil's essay on collaborative research, I found myself agreeing with virtually all of his conclusions. I suspect that this is because of the persuasiveness of his argumentation, but I must confess that some homophily—birds of a feather flocking together—might be at work. Thinking like Gil Geis is hardly a bad thing, whatever the reason. His writings avoided foolishness and vacuous ideology. With great clarity and wit, he would unmask objective reality. But underlying this commitment to truth was a warm heart. Gil was capable of being direct, but he did not have a mean bone in his body.

In embracing Gil's views encouraging student-faculty collaborative research, I feel compelled to add two important caveats. First, I am not preaching that publishing with students is appropriate for all faculty. I favor student collaboration because I do it and enjoy it. But other faculty might find working with students an invitation to headache and criticism. If so, then student co-authors are best avoided. Second, I am not unmindful that

collaboration can foster ethical lapses and risk the charge of exploitation. Still, not working with students can lead to their neglect or, in some cases, to students' belief that they should have been included on a publication but were not (e.g., completed tasks on a project as part of a graduate assistantship). My simple point is that collaboration with students has no inherent ethical status—whether one does or does not. It is all in whether the choice and resulting actions are principled.

Below, I outline five reasons why I agree with Gil Geis that student-faculty collaboration is to be encouraged. I share my views as a way of honoring Gil's memory and his enduring legacy in the field.

REASON #1: RICHARD CLOWARD

Richard Cloward was my academic father—my mentor for whom I retain a deep affection. I still list him on the first page of my vitae as my dissertation advisor. How I came to work with him was somewhat serendipitous. During my first year at Columbia University, I wandered over to the School of Social Work, where he was a faculty member, and enrolled in his course on "Deviance and the Social Structure." I said little and was content to sit amidst the student crowd and hear Professor Cloward lecture. I was heartened that my one assignment for the course, a term paper, received an A+ with only two words of commentary added on the front page—"Good job." On the hope that he did not hand out A-pluses to everyone, I marshaled the courage to ask him for a readings course—a request to which he agreed.

I could not imagine my good fortune and thus worked diligently to read everything he assigned carefully and in record time. In our third meeting (or thereabouts), Professor Cloward (I would later come to call him, awkwardly, “Dick”) asked if I wanted to write my dissertation under his direction. I said that I would have to think about it, and then agreed twenty seconds later! I was not a fool; I understood the opportunity that I was being afforded.

Professor Cloward was an amazing mentor. He constantly encouraged me to “see the larger issue” at hand. He told me: “Frank, let the other people do those shitty little studies. You make sense of them.” One day, I was at his apartment to help him on a grant he was writing on theoretical ideas. He would go into his study and type a page, and then emerge and have me read it. It was like watching Picasso paint, stroke by stroke. I lacked the hubris to imagine that I could do what he was doing. But I now had a glimpse of how a great mind fashioned an argument persuasively.

To this day, I do not have SPSS on my computer and do not do statistics. However, I do have some talent in framing arguments and seeing the larger picture. I owe this academic style to Professor Cloward’s mentorship. He taught me how to think.

Because my experience with Richard Cloward was so positive, it made sense to mirror my mentoring style after his. Sometimes, plagiarism is a good idea! Two features of his mentoring shaped my practice. First, I try to select students who I wish to mentor in the first year or two of doctoral study. In this way, I have a chance to work with them for an extended period of time, including in collaboration with older students of mine. Second, I pay a lot of attention to how my students think and how they write.

Still, there was one gift not given to me by my mentor: co-authorship. Cloward did not publish any articles with me. I never felt resentful because he helped develop the most important skill an academic can possess: the ability to publish independently. Nonetheless, I very much hoped he would do so. At the time, my main concern was finding a good job and moving up the academic hierarchy. Were I to have had a few “Cloward and Cullen” articles, I surely would have had an easier time of it. Looking back, I also realize that working closely with him for an extended period of time would have taught me a great deal. My scholarly skills would have been sharper.

Thus, from this omission, I developed one further mentoring principle: Offer students the opportunity to publish with me! Rarely have these invitations been refused.

REASON #2: BEYOND MONEY

I do not write research grants to major funding agencies, except when I can be a free-rider on the tails of

another prominent scholar, such as my Cincinnati colleagues Bonnie Fisher and Mike Benson. It is not that I dislike having the government purchase my release time and pay me “extra compensation”; I welcome such luxuries! Further, my involvement in federally funded research projects has resulted in some major publications, such as on the measurement of sexual victimization (Fisher, Daigle, and Cullen 2010) and on the local prosecution of corporations for criminal offenses (Benson and Cullen 1998). But unlike major “grant-getters,” I have not been driven to have money pouring into my coffers. It seemed that throughout my career, I never wanted to stop what I was already doing and write grants. The money was not that important.

Despite having no money to offer anyone, I have had 190 co-authors, about one-third of who were, at the time of the published writing, current or former students. Why do people, especially students, wish to work with me? It is not a function of my supposed status. I started teaching at age 25 at Western Illinois University, where I stayed six years in relative obscurity (with my job applications rejected at a rate of 30 to 40 per year!). Yet even at this time of my profound academic anonymity, 10 different students collaborated with me on projects that were eventually published.

Notably, none of these students—or those that followed them as Cullen Co-Authors—worked for me for money (unless Bonnie and Mike were paying them!). I have often joked with colleagues that I sit at the peak of a publishing pyramid scheme, with various sets of authors all out in the world producing data and articles for me. Fortunately, the scheme does not collapse, and it does produce a lot of research.

So, again, why are students drawn to work with me on projects, when I offer them zero monetary compensation? For doctoral students, there is the practical consideration that I will help them acquire publications and advance their careers (we can call this an indirect monetary influence). But I think something more is involved. Most graduate students crave the chance to create knowledge. They are tired of sitting on the side-line, taking notes in an endless roster of courses. They want to make the transition from consumers of knowledge to producers of knowledge. They are excited about the chance to explore the criminological world and to have their thoughts make a difference.

What I offer them, in short, is *academic fun*. Of course, various aspects of research require hard work and, at times, are tedious. Still, I have always had a deep gratitude to the American taxpayer for affording me the unique opportunity to study virtually anything that I wished. To this day, I remain excited about developing ideas, testing my views, and bringing works to print. If that is not fun, I do not know what is (see also Cullen 2002)! Students recognize this fact and want to hang out in my research playground. Collaboration thus is a conduit

to students enlivening their academic lives—a chance to do what they came to graduate school to do.

REASON #3: BETTER SCHOLARSHIP

I do not mean to suggest that collaborating with students is a one-way deal—that I provide them with fun and publications and get nothing in return. I try to be a nice person, but I am not stupid. Put another way, I believe that altruism (helping students) and self-interest (what I get in return) are not mutually exclusive. In fact, I think that both of these motives work best when joined together.

Above, I suggested that collaborating with students (and others) allows me to have a high rate of publication. But here I am suggesting something different: that my co-authors bring special skills to projects that enable me to write works of more consequences. My individual experience is not idiosyncratic. In fact, research reveals not only that co-authored publishing is increasingly normative (Fisher, Vander Ven, Cobane, Cullen, and Williams 1998) but also that collaborative articles earn more citations (have a higher impact) than solo-authored articles (Wuchty, Jones, and Uzzi 2007).

Let me give one example of what I mean. I now list the “organization of knowledge” as one of my research specializations. In part, this reflects my training in graduate school at Columbia University where Robert Merton, one of my professors, emphasized understanding the growth and dissemination of knowledge. Sensitized to issues of this sort, over the years I have grown wary of the field’s fetish for the single article. Such publications are important, but only if they contribute at some point to our organizing them and deciding what we know about the topic. Taken individually, they are testaments to personal ingenuity but they do not move the field forward (Cullen 2011).

A little over a decade ago, I wanted to make this point about the need to organize criminological knowledge. It seemed obvious to me that one means of doing so was through meta-analysis, a parsimonious way to explore the size and robustness of empirical associations. Alas, I had one problem: I did not have a clue how to do a meta-analysis. I might have forfeited this research idea, except that I was fortunate to have an extraordinarily talented graduate student at that time, Travis Pratt. Travis had the statistical talent and persistence to learn how to do meta-analysis. We joined our talents—mine for making a point and his for demonstrating it empirically—to publish in *Criminology* a meta-analysis that organized the extant knowledge available on self-control theory (Pratt and Cullen 2000). At last check on Google Scholar, this article has achieved a whopping 738 citations. It also led us to conduct additional meta-analyses organizing theoretical knowledge that are, I would maintain, of value (see, e.g., Pratt and Cullen 2005; Pratt et al. 2010).

I think that the point is clear: No Travis Pratt, no theoretical meta-analyses calling for and demonstrating the organization of knowledge with Cullen’s name on them! Students do not just leech off professors and achieve “undeserved” publications. They also provide invaluable talent, labor, and support that make research projects come to fruition and produce knowledge at a level that would not have been possible otherwise. In short, faculty-student collaboration leads to more and better scholarship that advances the field of criminology.

Let me add a collateral point. Collaboration also provides a certain kind of training to students. Much graduate education implicitly embraces a Bell Curve view of education. Teach statistics and methods, and let the bright students go forth and produce valuable research—while leaving the less talented behind. Of course, this model is true to a degree. Some students are good at figuring out the research process and become very good at it; some are not. However, there is a growing body of research showing that high-level skills can be learned not just by the talented few but by a fairly wide range of people, *if they are taught the right way* (Colvin 2008). We can break the Bell Curve; the normal distribution is not destiny!

This magical teaching technique is called *deliberate practice* (for a full discussion, see Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Römer 1993). The gist of this approach is that students are taught the components of complex skills step by step in a very systematic way. Each step pushes the student to exert effort to learn the skill in a more advanced way. Often, it can take ten years to achieve true expert performance, whether the skill is something more physical such as tennis or something that is more cognitive such as chess. Now, obviously, we cannot devote a decade of individualized training to graduate students. Still, why we would think that our current model of classroom instruction would allow most students to actualize their potential to master complex research skills is beyond me.

The punch line, of course, is that working with students on research articles is the closest we come to instruction that involves deliberate practice. Because we have a direct stake in the outcome of the joint work, we train student co-authors to do things the right way—from the collection and analysis of data to the writing of manuscripts. Students see how many iterations a survey instrument or a draft of a manuscript go through. They see how ideas emerge and then deepen as the relevant research is read and carefully synthesized. And if we work with the same student on several projects over a period of time, then their skills are refined repeatedly and deliberately by us. The more skilled they become, the more responsibility we can give to them and the more we can push them to a higher level of performance. The result is the training of scholars who can contribute better scholarship to the field. Again, mere classroom learning will not accomplish this outcome to the same degree.

REASON #4: FATHERSHIP AND FRIENDSHIP

I have been blessed to have had the opportunity at the University of Cincinnati to mentor wonderful students. My roster of Ph.D. students that I have advised is remarkable—so good, in fact, that if we all worked together, we might comprise a nationally ranked department! My students include, in order of receiving their doctorates: Velmer S. Burton, Jr., R. Gregory Dunaway, T. David Evans, Liqun Cao, John Paul Wright, Brandon K. Applegate, Jody L. Sundt, Thomas M. Vander Ven, Amy B. Thislethwaite, Michael G. Turner, Travis C. Pratt, Elaine K. Gunnison (co-chair with Paul Mazerolle), Kristie R. Blevins, Leah E. Daigle, Brenda A. Vose, Matthew D. Makarios, Cheryl Lero Jonson, Rachel McArthur, Lacey Schaefer (now finishing her dissertation), and Jennifer Lux and Murat Haner (soon to start their dissertations).

These are my academic children. Kristie Blevins, in her down-home Tennessee style, came to call me “Daddy C.” I did not discourage this appellation, in part because it captured not only her respect for me but also my affection toward her as one of my special students.

I am not saying that publishing with one’s students is a precondition to academic fatherhood. But it has worked for me. With but two exceptions, I have published writings with all of my former doctoral students, typically multiple times and typically both before and after their graduation from Cincinnati’s doctoral program. I have discovered that working on research projects not only produces knowledge and vitae lines, but also is the kind of quality time that builds personal closeness. When conducting a study and writing an article, contact with my co-authors—often a “Cullen Student”—is extensive and, at times, daily. Students visit my home, eat Subway sandwiches with me, play with my dogs, and receive uninvited lessons on how to hit a tennis forehand! Some have stayed to two o’clock in the morning, finishing up work. If not in my home, then they are on the phone with me—for hours on end. The e-mails flow back and forth. We are involved in one another’s lives with an intensity that is rarely matched in another forum. Our relationship grows and is transformed into an enduring attachment.

When students are still at Cincinnati, I tell them that I am “not your friend. I can still fail you!” This remark is both true (I must maintain an edge of distance) but also disingenuous—they are, in fact, becoming my friends. So, collaboration with students leads to fatherhood, perhaps at first, and then ultimately to friendship, as co-equals in the profession and when working on articles. Upon graduation, most do not ride off into the academic sunset never to be seen again. Instead, we stay in touch. And when we find reason to collaborate, it is like old times. The excitement over ideas returns, we plot and scheme how to bring a work to print, and our friendship—and my

fatherhood—are nourished! No wonder that I cherish the opportunities I have to write with my academic children.

REASON #5: GIL AND CHERYL

Pam Wilcox and I had no idea what we were getting into when we agreed to edit Sage’s *Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory*. Under the cover of two huge volumes, we had to solicit and edit over 280 selections. Being compulsive sorts, we did a pretty good job keeping everything straight, but there were a few glitches along the way. One involved our assigning two essays on Donald R. Cressey—one dealing with his work on white-collar crime and another with his work on embezzlement. As these essays began to unfold, we realized that they would overlap to a distressing degree. What to do?

Fortunately, we knew both essays’ authors quite well. Cheryl Lero Jonson was my doctoral student (now a faculty member at Xavier University) and the other was Gil Geis! We asked if they might merge their efforts. As expected, Gil was magnanimous and immediately agreed to do so—and as the piece’s second author. Cheryl had no choice but to agree, but the prospect of working with a famous criminologist caused her considerable trepidation. She did not want to disappoint Gil or embarrass me.

The collaboration—faculty member (Gil) with a student (Cheryl)—turned out wonderfully. One by-product was an excellent essay on Cressey (Jonson and Geis 2010). But more important, working with Gil proved to be a truly memorable experience for Cheryl. She witnessed how a scholar at the top of his discipline was nonetheless kind and thoughtful. Gil would give guidance to Cheryl and have her draft materials. Cheryl would then watch as Gil transformed her more-than-competent text into something that was simpler in words but deeper in meaning—something that somehow became, at once, more accessible and more eloquent. Yes, Gil was a master craftsman—a writer of almost unparalleled skill.

As her advisor, I enjoyed watching this mentoring from afar—Gil in California, Cheryl in Ohio. Understandably, Cheryl was a touch reluctant to share her writing with Gil, for she knew that the draft she would receive in return would bear only a slight resemblance to what she had sent to California. But as I explained, Cheryl was enjoying a rare privilege—and something that I, her mentor, had experienced when I co-authored articles with Gilbert Geis! Writing with Gil was a special learning experience and an opportunity to be cherished. Cheryl, of course, did. More than this, though, she also established a new friend—someone to say hello to at the next meeting of the American Society of Criminology. She was now officially one of Gil’s 124 co-authors, a status that few would ever regret.

CONCLUSION

Academic work in general is, I suspect, much like other kinds of work: It can be performed well or poorly, and it can improve or exploit lives. It is all in how it is done. Collaborative research with students—one slice of the academic enterprise—is no different. When undertaken well and ethically, it can lead to high-quality scholarship and to the creation of social capital that improves students' lives in many ways. Notably, Gil Geis worked jointly with others the right way. He used his passion for ideas, technical brilliance, erudition, criminological imagination, and fundamental decency to ensure that publishing with students was a conduit for enjoyment, friendship, learning, and the creation of knowledge. If we follow his example, then I am persuaded that our students—as Gil's now do—will have nothing but fond memories when they reflect on their collaboration with us.

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