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A General Age-Graded Theory of Crime: Lessons Learned and the Future of Life-Course Criminology

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The intellectual move we take in this chapter is to elucidate the life-course implications of a general age-graded theory of crime. In doing so we depart from the modus operandi of most developmental criminological theory by looking at changes in criminal behavior through a common theoretical lens that we have built through a longstanding inquiry (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Laub & Sampson, 2003). The growing tendency in developmental criminology is for greater specificity, not generality, manifested most noticeably in moves to subdivide the offender population and characteristics of the so-called criminal career, apportioning bits and pieces to different theoretical positions and different causal influences. Hirschi (1979) once called this the end-to-end or side-by-side strategy of theoretical integration.

Considering that the pieces of the developmental criminological pie are large, this temptation is understandable. Farrington (2003), for example, notes key results developmental criminology ought to explain, such as the onset of delinquency, versatility, escalation, co-offending, persistence, and desistance, to name a few. With all the complexity implied, it follows that one might need to posit a theory for onset and another for continuation, or one theory for violent crime and another for property crime, and so on and so forth. The list is endless and indeed many have argued for just such an approach. Or even more likely and increasingly attractive to many, one might divide up the offender population into different types, asserting that some factors uniquely explain persistent offenders whereas another set of causal factors explain desistance. Interdisciplinary theory is also all the rage, with "multilevel" attempts to integrate biological, psychological, and sociological theories seemingly everywhere.

In this chapter we take a different route to explanation by tracing out the implications of a general age-graded theory of informal social control, focus-

ing especially on the largely uncharted territory of persistence and desistance across the *adult* life course. Although at first it may seem counterintuitive, our fundamental argument is that persistent offending and desistance can be meaningfully understood within the same theoretical framework. In its strong form, our argument is that persistence in crime is explained by a lack of social controls, few structured routine activities, and purposeful human agency. Simultaneously, desistance from crime is explained by a confluence of social controls, structured routine activities, and purposeful human agency. In this version of our argument the fundamental causes of offending are the same for all persons, although for some there may be a single pathway to crime or desistance, whereas for others there are multiple pathways. Regardless of the number of pathways, however, we hypothesize that the same class of causal mechanisms account for trajectories (pathways) of criminal behavior over the life course. Moreover, the specific manifestations of violence may be different than the specific manifestations of property crime, but both can nevertheless be explained by the same general processes, namely, informal social control, routine activities, and human agency. Expanding on this notion, the dynamics of persistence in crime may be different than the dynamics of desistance from crime, but both can still logically be explained by general processes of social control, routine activities, and human agency.

In short, our approach stands in opposition to the subdivision of offenders and offenses. We seek instead to explicate the implications for developmental criminology of a general approach to the adult life course by drawing out the lessons learned in an earlier study, *Crime in the Making: Pathways and Turning Points Through Life* (Sampson & Laub, 1993), and the more recent *Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives: Delinquent Boys to Age 70* (Laub & Sampson, 2003).

Crime in the Making and the Origins of Life-Course Criminology

We begin with a brief historical perspective. The story began for us in 1986 when we stumbled across the dusty archives of a classic but largely forgotten study of delinquency housed in the basement of the Harvard Law School. The study was *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency* and subsequent follow-ups conducted by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck of the Harvard Law School. This study is considered to be one of the most influential in the history of criminological research. The Gluecks' data were derived from a three wave prospective study of juvenile and adult criminal behavior. The research design involved a sample of 500 male delinquents ages 10-17 and 500 male nondelinquents ages 10-17 matched case-by-case on age, race/ethnicity, IQ, and low-income residence in Boston. Extensive data were collected on the 1,000 boys at three points in time—ages 14, 25, and 32 (see Glueck & Glueck, 1950, 1968). Over a period of six years (1987-1993), we reconstructed, augmented, and analyzed the full

longitudinal data set, now housed in the Murray Research Center archive at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University. These data are immensely rich, and will likely never be repeated given modern IRB restrictions (e.g., wide-ranging interviews with teachers, neighbors, and employers; detailed psychiatric assessments; pictures; searches of multiple agency records).

Crime in the Making was driven by the following challenge: could we develop and test a theoretical model that accounts for crime and deviance in childhood, adolescence, *and* adulthood? To answer this question we synthesized and integrated the criminological literature on childhood antisocial behavior, adolescent delinquency, and adult crime with theory and research on the life course. This strategy led us to develop a theory of age-graded informal social control to explain childhood antisocial behavior, adolescent delinquency, and crime in early adulthood. The general organizing principle was that crime is more likely to occur when an individual's bond to society is attenuated, a move that contrasted both to the Gluecks' emphasis on "psychodynamic" individual factors and to the focus on poverty and legal sanctions in much of traditional criminology.

Our theoretical framework was organized around three major themes. The first is that structural context is mediated in fundamental respects by informal family and school social controls, which in turn explain delinquency in childhood and adolescence. The second theme is that there is strong continuity in antisocial behavior running from childhood through adulthood across a variety of life domains. The third theme is that informal social control in adulthood explains changes in criminal behavior over the life span, independent of prior individual differences in criminal propensity. In our view, childhood pathways to crime and conformity over the life course are significantly influenced by adult social bonds.

Our theory explicitly links delinquency and adult crime to childhood and adolescent characteristics as well as socializing influences in adulthood. Early delinquency predicts weak adult social bonds, and weak adult social bonds predict concurrent and later adult crime and deviance. The process is thus one in which childhood antisocial behavior and adolescent delinquency are linked to adult crime and deviance in part through weak social bonds.

We also believe, however, that salient life events and socialization experiences in adulthood can counteract, at least to some extent, the influence of early life experiences. For instance, late onset of criminal behavior can be accounted for by weak social bonds in adulthood, despite a background of nondelinquent behavior. Conversely, desistance from criminal behavior in adulthood can be explained by strong social bonds in adulthood, despite a background of delinquent behavior. In short, our theory provides a social explanation of stability *and* change in crime and deviance over the life course with an explicit focus on within-individual changes in offending and deviance.

What are the major findings from *Crime in the Making* with regard to key theoretical and empirical issues facing life-course criminology?

Causes of Delinquency

We found that the strongest and most consistent effects on both official and unofficial delinquency in adolescence flow from processes of social control connected to family, school, and peers. Three family factors stood out as strongly predictive of delinquency: low levels of parental supervision; the combination of erratic, threatening, and harsh discipline; and weak parental attachment. In addition, school attachment had large negative associations with delinquency independent of family processes. Both family and school factors behaved much as would be predicted from Hirschi's *Causes of Delinquency* (1969), including the fact that they were more closely associated with delinquency than the more distal and structural predictors of family background (e.g., size, class).

Attachment to delinquent peers had a significant positive effect on delinquency regardless of family and school process, but we were unable to separate effectively the fact of delinquency itself from the delinquency of peers. In the Glueck data the only satisfactory way to address this dilemma was to compare the influence of attachment to delinquent siblings with attachment to delinquent peers, on the argument that sibling influences are less contaminated by selection than peer influences. The results showed that sibling influences were insignificant yet peer delinquency remained a strong correlate of the delinquency of the boy, an indication that the latter two measures were tapping the same construct. Based on this analysis we concluded that family and school processes were more important factors in the causal chain than peers.

Perhaps more important, we found that structural background factors (e.g., family poverty) had little direct effect on delinquency, but instead were mediated by intervening sources of informal social control. Moreover, whereas difficult children who display early antisocial tendencies (e.g., violent temperament) do sort themselves into later stages of delinquency, the processes of informal social control explained the largest share of variance in adolescent delinquency. Individual predisposition, in other words, cannot explain away the relationship between social control and delinquency.

Stability and Change in Criminal Behavior over the Life Course

Whereas our analysis of delinquency shared much in common with classical control theory, the reality of later life-course milestones required us to develop a new theoretical perspective. After all, the transition to young adulthood brings with it new social control institutions and turning points that go well beyond adolescence. We thus developed an age-graded theory that focused on informal social controls that were manifested in shifting and possibly transformative

ways as individuals age. This theoretical perspective was applied to both continuity and change in adult crime.

For example, independent of age, IQ, neighborhood SES, and ethnicity, the original delinquents and nondelinquents in the Gluecks' study displayed behavioral consistency—both homotypic and heterotypic—well into adulthood. Indeed, delinquency and other forms of antisocial conduct in childhood were strongly related to troublesome adult behavior across a variety of life's domains (e.g., crime, military offenses, economic dependence, and marital discord). But why? One of the mechanisms of continuity that we emphasized was "cumulative disadvantage," whereby delinquency undermined later bonds of social control, which in turn enhanced the chances of continued offending.

Consistent with an emphasis on adult developmental change and informal social control, however, we found that job stability and marital attachment in adulthood were significantly related to changes in adult crime—the stronger the adult ties to work and family, the less crime and deviance among both the delinquent and control groups. We even found that strong marital attachment inhibits crime and deviance regardless of that spouse's own deviant behavior, and that job instability fosters crime regardless of heavy drinking. Moreover, social bonds to employment were directly influenced by state sanctions—incarceration as a juvenile and as an adult had negative effects on later job stability, which in turn was negatively related to continued involvement in crime over the life course. Although we found little direct effect of incarceration on subsequent criminality, the indirect "criminogenic" effects appear substantively important.

Despite differences in early childhood experiences, adult social bonds to work and family thus had similar consequences for the life trajectories of the 500 delinquents and 500 nondelinquent controls. These results were consistent for a wide variety of crime outcome measures, control variables (e.g., childhood antisocial behavior and individual-difference constructs) and analytical techniques, including methods that accounted for persistent unobserved heterogeneity in criminal propensity.

In *Crime in the Making* we also explored a new way of portraying life histories of persons in context. Our strategy was to challenge the quantitative findings with a systematic and intensive examination of qualitative data drawn from the Gluecks' original case files. Integrating divergent sources of information on life histories, the qualitative analysis supported the central idea of our theoretical model that there is stability and change in behavior over the life course and that these changes are systematically linked to the institutions of work and family relations in adulthood. Through an analysis of the narrative data found in the Glueck case files, we found evidence supporting the notion that poor job stability and weak marital attachment to one's spouse increased the likelihood of criminal activity and deviant behavior. Conversely, the case records supported the idea that strong job stability and

attachment to one's spouse reduce the likelihood of involvement in criminal and deviant behavior.

Taken as a whole, then, our qualitative and quantitative findings suggest that social ties embedded in adult transitions (e.g., marital attachment, job stability) help explain variations in crime unaccounted for by childhood propensities. This empirical regularity supports our dual concern with continuity and change in the life course. A fundamental thesis of our age-graded theory of informal social control and crime was that whereas individual traits and childhood experiences are important for understanding behavioral stability, experiences in adolescence and adulthood can redirect criminal trajectories in either a more positive or more negative manner. In particular, we found that job stability and marital attachment in adulthood were significantly related to changes in adult crime—the stronger the adult ties to work and family, the less crime and deviance among both delinquents and nondelinquent controls. We concluded that adult "turning points" were crucial for understanding processes of change.

The Legacy of *Crime in the Making*

Crime in the Making raised many questions, and in its concluding chapter we highlighted possible directions for future research and theoretical development that appeared fruitful. Two of these directions seemed especially relevant for developmental/life-course theories of crime; namely, the merging of quantitative and qualitative data and further understanding of age and crime (see Sampson & Laub, 1993: 251-253). After the publication of *Crime in the Making* we thus began to contemplate its limitations and considered where these directions might lead. For example, what about crime in middle age? Older age? Is there really such a thing as a life-long career criminal—or what have been dubbed "life-course persisters?" How far does our age-graded theory reach? In short, what about crime across the full life course?

We also became interested in how qualitative narratives might allow for a more person-based exploration of the life course. In our view, life-history narratives combined with quantitative approaches can be used to develop a richer and more comprehensive picture of why some men persist in offending and why others stop. Narratives help us unpack mechanisms that connect salient life events across the life course, especially personal choice and situational context. Life histories can provide the human voices to counterbalance the wide range of statistical data and the social sciences at large (see also Bennett, 1981; Clausen, 1993; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). We made a start on narrative inquiry in *Crime in the Making* but were forced to rely on the Gluecks' original records rather than our own life-history interviews.

These motivations led us to follow up the Glueck men to the present. Our study involved three sources of new data collection—criminal record checks (local and national), death record checks (local and national) and personal

interviews with a sample of fifty-two of the original Glueck men, stratified to ensure variability in patterns of persistence and desistance in crime (for details, see Laub & Sampson, 2003: chap. 4). These combined data represent a roughly fifty-year window on "criminal careers," allowing us to update the Glueck men's lives at the close of the twentieth century and connect them to life experiences all the way back to early childhood. We believe these data represent the longest longitudinal study to date in criminology of the same men, and thus can provide important lessons for future life course/developmental theories of crime. Before we turn to these lessons, we provide a brief summary of our key findings.

Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives: An Overview

Although counterintuitive at first, we came to the conclusion that the data supported the notion that explanations of desistance from crime and persistent offending in crime are two sides of the same coin. Consider the phenomenon of desistance. From our analysis of offender narratives and life histories it appears that offenders desist as a result of individual actions (choice) in conjunction with situational contexts and structural influences linked to key institutions that help sustain desistance. As such we argued that desistance is a process rather than an event, and that it must be continually renewed. This fundamental theme underscores the need to examine individual motivation and the social context in which individuals are embedded. The processes of desistance operate simultaneously at different levels (individual, situational, and community) and across different contextual environments (especially family, work, and military service). The process of desistance is more than mere aging and more than individual predisposition.

It appears that successful cessation from crime occurs when the proximate causes of crime are disrupted. A central element in the desistance process is the "knifing off" of individual offenders from their immediate environment and offering them a new script for the future (see also Moffitt, 1993). Institutions like the military and reform school have this knifing-off potential, as does marriage, although the knifing-off effect of marriage may not be as dramatic. Another component in the desistance process is the "structured role stability" that emerges across various life domains (for example, marriage, work, community). The men who desisted from crime shared a daily routine that provided both structure and meaningful activity.

Overall, then, while there are multiple pathways to desistance, we found what appear to be important general processes or mechanisms at work that are consistent with the idea of informal social control. The major self-described turning points that we found implicated in the desistance process included marriage/spouses, the military, reform school, work, and neighborhood change. What appears to be important about these institutional or structural turning

points is that they all involve, to varying degrees: (1) *New situations that knife off the past from the present*; (2) *New situations that provide both supervision and monitoring as well as new opportunities of social support and growth*; (3) *New situations that change and structure routine activities*; (4) *New situations that provide the opportunity for identity transformation*. While some offenders may seek to “make good” or engage in “up-front work” to better their lives (Maruna, 2001; Giordano et al., 2002), we believe that most offenders choose to desist in response to structurally induced turning points that serve as the catalyst for sustaining long-term behavioral change. In a way, then, we propose that crime is analogous to addiction. The addiction is not physiological but rather more profound—crime, and the action that is entailed in committing it, is seductive, alluring, and hard to give up despite its clear costs.

Persistent Offenders

Is there something unique about “persistent” offenders that distinguishes them from other offenders? Space limitations do not allow us to reflect in detail on our narrative understanding, but the take away is that the same general factors that explain desistance are relevant for persistence as well. From our data, more than being identified by a single trait like poor verbal intelligence or low self-control, or even a series of static traits, the persistent offender, to the extent the term has meaning, seems devoid of linking structures at each phase of the life course, especially involving relationships that can provide nurturing, social support, and informal social control. Generally, the persistent offenders we interviewed experienced considerable residential instability, marital instability, job instability, failure in the school and the military, and relatively long periods of incarceration. Except when in prison or jail, they were “social nomads,” to use Michel Foucault’s (1995) term. Without permanent addresses, steady jobs, spouses, children, and other rooted forms of life, crime and deviance are an unsurprising result. As a consequence of chaotic and unstructured routines, the Glueck men had increased contact with those individuals who were similarly situated—in this case, similarly unattached and free from nurturing and informal social control. Interestingly, however, even persistent offenders eventually gave up crime and exhibited the classic pattern of declining crime with age. Thus, age itself plays a key role, with the same mechanisms discussed earlier taking time to kick in and playing a more tenuous role. In the case of adult persistent offenders, the eventual sustaining of desistance seemed almost a daily struggle, even at older ages.

Having briefly summarized our theory and findings, we turn to the lessons we have learned that we believe bear on future thinking about life-course/developmental criminology. We view these not so much as specific hypotheses such as those discussed above (e.g., that delinquency is more likely to result

when informal social controls are diminished). Rather, we highlight broad-based implications of our findings that can serve as an orienting framework for organizing research and the testing of causal theories of crime across the full life course.

Theoretical Lesson 1: The Importance of the Adult Life Course

Our analyses have shown that the aggregate age-crime curve is not the same as individual trajectories, lending support to one of the main claims of the criminal career model. One striking characteristic of our data is the heterogeneity in criminal behavior over the adult life course (see also Rutter, Giller, & Hagell, 1998). On the other hand, we find that crime declines with age even for active offenders and that trajectories of desistance cannot be prospectively identified based on typological accounts rooted in childhood and individual differences. While childhood prognoses are reasonably accurate in terms of predicting levels of crime between individuals up to their 20s, they do not yield distinct groupings that are valid prospectively over the life course.

That all offenses eventually decline by the middle adult years for all groups of offenders identified according to extant theory and a multitude of childhood and adolescent risk factors suggests to us that general desistance processes are at work across the life course and that these processes can only be explained by examining the full interplay of childhood, adolescent, and adult experiences. Certainly the data are clear that adult trajectories of offending among former delinquents cannot be reduced to the past. Moreover, our analysis of within-individual change demonstrates the impact of time-varying life events, especially marriage, even as the men were in their 50s and 60s. Overall, our data show that the question of predicting adult criminal trajectories among troubled boys is not an easy one if one limits the causal matrix to childhood endowments. What, then, accounts for child-focused models and the emphasis in criminology on "early" prediction? We believe the disconnect stems in part from a dominant bias in our culture that assigns divergent adult outcomes to the realm of varying childhood experiences. In *Three Seductive Ideas* (1998), Jerome Kagan wrote on why notions of childhood determinism have such appeal, and David Bordua wrote back in 1961 on the false seductions of prediction in criminology. Whatever the source, it is almost as if a "psychiatric impulse" has gripped developmental criminology anew, with cultural beliefs about the childhood-adult connection distorted by methodological approaches that look back over the life course of adult offenders, where the simple "bad boys-bad men" connection seems to fit quite well. However, if we begin with children and follow their paths to adulthood, we find considerable heterogeneity in adult outcomes. It follows that the adult life course matters and that childhood causation models are woefully inadequate.

Theoretical Lesson 2: Group-Based Theories are Not Supported

The “group” question might be said to be the question of the day in developmental criminology. From proponents of the criminal career approach, the idea has proliferated that chronic offenders are a distinct group that, as the adjective implies, do not desist from crime. A variation on this theme is Moffitt’s (1993) notion that there is a causally distinct group—“life-course persisters”—that continues offending at a high rate as they age. Nagin (2005) has also developed a group-based methodology that rests on the assumption that there are distinct offender groups, which in turn implies that each group has distinct causal mechanisms.

Unfortunately, criminal careers are typically studied over circumscribed portions of the life course, and trajectories of crime are usually identified retrospectively, based on the outcome, rather than prospectively, based on the causal factors presumed to differentiate groups of offenders. Post-hoc typologies of offenders are thus ubiquitous, whereas prospective categorization of risk typologies and valid criminal trajectories over the long run that would support or invalidate them, are not.

One of the major strengths of our study, by contrast, is its ability to examine within-individual variability over nearly the entire life course. Moreover, the original design in *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency* targeted serious, persistent delinquents in adolescence, providing an important opportunity to assess patterns of continuity and change in crime for a population of high interest and concern to policy efforts that target “high risk” children.

Our findings can be succinctly summarized. The age-crime curve is essentially replicated for offender groups that are prospectively defined. That is, offenses eventually decline for all groups of offenders identified according to extant theory and a multitude of childhood and adolescent risk factors. Whether low IQ, aggressive temperament, or early onset of antisocial behavior, desistance processes are at work even for the highest-risk and predicted life-course persistent offenders. While childhood prognoses are modestly accurate in predicting level differences, they simply do not yield distinct groupings that are valid prospectively for troubled kids. Not only is prediction clearly poor at the individual level, our data reveal the tenuous basis for the sorts of distinct groupings that dominate theoretical discussion (e.g., “super predator”; “life-course persistent offender”). These groupings wither when placed under the microscope of long-term observation (Laub & Sampson, 2003: chap. 5; Sampson & Laub, 2003).

Our data thus undermine what might be termed the causal theory of groups and the idea that offender groupings are meaningful in the sense of social ontology. The widely noted “life-course persister” group, for example, may be useful in terms of a *heuristic* device, but in terms of theoretical validity as a distinctive and replicable group that has decisive implications for etiological

theory, we believe the evidence is thin. It is interesting to note that group-based research has by now firmly rejected the notion that there are only two groups of offenders, with the apparent result that life-course persisters have become subdivided into multiple chronic-offender groups (see also Eggleston et al., 2004). We question the wisdom of this move. An additional interesting dilemma, of course, is that group-based methodologies *begin* with the methodological assumption that groups exist. It is then easy for one to conclude that groups exist because they are discovered, even though a model cannot be said to discover what it assumes!

So lesson 2, we would assert, is that childhood typologies are disconfirmed at the prospective level. Put differently, we do not find good evidence that there are causally distinct groups with causally distinct trajectories. Even when we selected a small subgroup of men with criminal activity in each decade of life (less than 10 percent), the age-crime curve was obtained. We believe these findings, if replicated in future research, have important implications for developmental criminology, similar to those put forth by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990). Namely, our theory implies that offender subdivision is not warranted and that general mechanisms should in the first instance be sought for explaining crime at each age. We disagree with Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) specific causal focus on low self-control, however, which brings us to our next lesson.

Theoretical Lesson 3: The Causal Importance of Institutional Turning Points

The fact remaining to be explained is that there are important variations in adult criminal trajectories that cannot be predicted from childhood, contra the policy world and much yearning among criminologists. The question we are thus left with is what *does* account for these important patterns of offending? Many of the original Glueck delinquents did in fact persist, at least for a while, whereas other delinquents desisted soon after adolescence. To examine this issue, our recent analysis of adult crime uncovered some common features of explanation.

The lesson we would draw is that institutions matter for understanding crime over the life course. More precisely, involvement in institutions such as marriage, work, and the military reorders short-term situational inducements to crime and, over time, redirects long-term commitments to conformity. In making the case for the importance of the adult life course we have referred to involvement in these institutions as turning points because they can change trajectories over time (see Sampson & Laub, 1993, and Laub & Sampson, 1993). A potential objection, however, is that turning points are a result of selection bias, or put differently, the unobserved characteristics of the person.

To shed further light on the causal nature of life events we exploited the rich nature of the longitudinal data set that we collected. Specifically, we have

statistical power to examine within-individual change where the unit of variation is across time, not persons. As such stable characteristics of the person are held constant and we can examine changes in social location, such as marriage, in terms of deviations from the person's expected trajectory. Holding age constant and allowing individual heterogeneity we found that *when* in a state of marriage, propensity to crime is lower for the same person than when not in marriage. Similar results were found for military service and steady employment. Quantitative models of within-individual change thus give strong statistical evidence of the probabilistic enhancement of desistance associated with life-course events like marriage, military service, and employment (Laub & Sampson, 2003: chap. 9). *More generally, our theory predicts that controlling for all stable characteristics of the person, time-varying indicators of informal social control will be negatively associated with crime at each stage of life.*

Another insight with respect to the role of institutions and their influence on criminal behavior was what might be characterized as the "drift" hypothesis of desistance, or what we came to call "desistance by default." The idea is that commitments were not necessarily made with great forethought, but rather were "by default"—the result of "side bets." The men made a commitment (or choice) to go straight without much realizing it. Before they knew it, they had invested so much in a marriage or a job that they did not want to risk losing their investment—hence desistance by default.

Theoretical Lesson 4: The Importance of Agency and Choice

But institutions are not the entire story, and in no way does our theory view human beings as merely passive. Indeed, another factor that we discovered as notable in the desistance process was personal agency—the purposeful execution of choice and individual will (Matza, 1964). For example, a vital feature that emerged from our qualitative narratives is that personal conceptions about the past and future are often transformed as men maneuver through the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Many men engaged in what can be called "transformative action." Although informed by the past, such action-oriented agency is oriented toward the future (and hence a future self). Projective actions in the transition from adolescence to adulthood that we uncovered were the advancement of a new sense of self and identity as a desister from crime or, perhaps more aptly, as a family man, hard worker, and good provider. As a result the men we studied were active participants in the choice to give up crime.

We also believe that human agency is vitally important for understanding persistent offending. Some men simply insist on a criminal lifestyle, not out of impulsivity or lack of knowledge of future consequences, but rather because of the rewards of crime itself (Katz, 1988) or a willful resistance to perceived domination (Sherman, 1993)—all at the expense of the future self. As revealed in many of our life history narratives, calculated and articulated resistance to

authority is a recurrent theme in lives of persistent offenders. The men's defiance seemed to have been fueled by a perceived sense of injustice resulting from corrosive contacts with officials of the criminal justice system, coupled with a general sense of working-class alienation from elite society. Many persistent offenders see "the system" (criminal justice and work alike) as unfair and corrupt (see also Willis, 1977).

In crucial ways then, criminal persistence is more than a weakening of social bonds, and desistance is more than the presence of a social bond, as one might be led to conclude (mistakenly) from *Crime in the Making*. At a meta-theoretical level, our long-term follow-up data direct us to insist that a focus purely on institutional, or structural, turning points and opportunities is incomplete, for such opportunities are mediated by perceptions and human decision-making. Even if below the surface of active consciousness, as in the concept of desistance by default, actions to desist are in a fundamental sense willed by the offender, bringing a richer meaning to the notion of commitment. Further support for this idea is that the men who desisted from crime, but even those who persisted, accepted responsibility for their actions and freely admitted getting into trouble. They did not, for the most part, offer excuses. Tough times due to the Great Depression, uncaring parents, poor schools, discrimination based on ethnicity and class, and the like, were not invoked to explain their criminal pasts. One man captured this opinion the best when he said, "*Not because of my mother and father. Because of me. I'm the one that made it shitty.*"

In short, our findings imply that agency induces a seeming instability or random component into life-course turning points, making neat prediction—even from adult factors—inherently a difficult if not impossible endeavor. As we conclude below, turning points and structural supports may be necessary conditions in our theory but they are not sufficient. Human beings make choices to participate in crime or not, and theories of the life course have been remiss to have left agency—which is essentially human social action—largely out of the theoretical picture. Our effort can be seen as one to reposition human agency as a central element in understanding crime and deviance over the life course (Laub & Sampson, 2003: chaps. 6-8; see also Wikström, 2004). To be sure, *Shared Beginnings* is not a complete response, for we did not develop an explicit theory of human agency replete with testable causal hypotheses. Our theoretical claim herein is simply that the data make clear that agency is a crucial ingredient in causation and thus will be a first-order challenge for future work in life-course criminology.

Summary Implications for Developmental Criminology

Development (sviluppo in Italian, desarrollo in Spanish, Entwicklung in German) is literally an unfolding or unrolling of something that is *already present and in some way preformed*.

—Richard Lewontin

If one defines development as life-history change, then developmental criminology should focus on changes in the development of crime and antisocial behavior over time. Researchers such as David Farrington, David Hawkins, Marc Le Blanc, Rolf Loeber, Joan McCord, Terrie Moffitt, Daniel Nagin, Gerry Patterson, Lee Robins, Terry Thornberry, and Richard Tremblay have been in the forefront of this important movement in criminology. Relying on a central insight from Shakespeare—that the child is father to the man (see Caspi, 2000)—these researchers have addressed how developmental processes are linked to the onset, continuation, and cessation of criminal and antisocial behavior. Much has been learned and developmental criminology is now ascendant.

In our view, however, a key misunderstood issue concerns the very meaning of development in developmental criminology. Lewontin has stated that "...the term *development* is a metaphor that carries with it a prior commitment to the nature of the process" (2000: 5, emphasis in the original). Using the analogy of a photographic image, Lewontin argues that the way the term development is used is a process that makes the latent image apparent. This seems to be what developmental criminological theory is all about. For example, in Moffitt's theory of crime, the environment offers a "set of enabling conditions" that allow individual traits to express themselves. Although reciprocal interactions with the environment are allowed, life-course persistent offenders and adolescent-limited offenders follow a pre-programmed line of development in a crucial respect—an unwinding, an unfolding, or an unrolling of what is fundamentally "already there." The view of development as a predetermined unfolding is linked to a typological understanding of the world—different internal programs will have different outcomes for individuals of a different type. As Lewontin writes, "If the development of an individual is the unfolding of a genetic program immanent in the fertilized egg, then variations in the outcome of development must be consequences of variations in that program" (2000: 17).

Debates about development in the social sciences are not new (see, for example, the exchange between Dannefer, 1984, and Baltes and Nesselroade, 1984). Some developmentalists recognize social interactions, but in the end most embrace a between-individual focus that emphasizes the primacy of early childhood attributes that are presumed to be stable. In our theory of crime, development is better conceived as the constant interaction between individuals and their environment, coupled with purposeful human agency and "random developmental noise" (Lewontin, 2000: 35-36). Recognizing developmental noise implies that "The organism is determined neither by its genes nor by its environment nor even by interaction between them, but bears a significant mark of random processes" (2000: 38). The challenge is that random processes and human agency are ever-present realities, making prediction once again problematic. It further follows that long-term patterns of offending among high-risk populations cannot be divined by individual differences (for example,

low verbal IQ), childhood characteristics (for example, early onset of misbehavior), or even adolescent characteristics (for example, chronic juvenile offending).

A key difference between our perspective and most developmental criminology concerns what would happen in an imagined world of perfect measurement. Even if *all* risk factors (even social controls!) were measured without error, our framework posits the continuous influence of randomizing events and human agency, leading again to heterogeneity, emergent processes, and lack of causal prediction. The logic of prediction that drives the search for early risk factors takes more nearly the opposite view. Indeed, one gets the sense from early interveners that it is just a matter of time before risk factors are measured well enough that the false positive problem will become ancient history. From the perspective of our theory this is wishful thinking and we instead predict enormous heterogeneity in criminal offending over the life course no matter what the childhood classification scheme of the future. Some “destined” offenders will always start late or refrain from crime altogether, whereas some “innocents” will always start early and continue for long periods of time. And a sizable portion of the offending population will always display a zigzag pattern of offending over long time periods.

Concluding Thoughts

We view our work as offering a dual critique of social science theory and current policy about crime over the life course. Developmentalists tend to believe that childhood and adolescent risk characteristics are what really matter—hence the rise of the “early risk-factor” paradigm. Our work shows otherwise. Another strand of developmental theory focuses, yet again in the history of criminology, on typologies and the idea of causally distinct groups. But these, too, fail to materialize over the long run. Simply put, there is no such thing as a foretold life-course persister or career criminal, the organizing focus of the “prediction” paradigm in criminal justice and selective incapacitation policies. Moreover, we see strong evidence that persistent offending and desistance from crime can be understood through a common theoretical lens, namely, a revised age-graded general theory of informal social control that emphasizes social ties, routine activities, and human agency (Laub & Sampson, 2003).

Not to be overlooked and equally important, our work critiques structuralist approaches in sociological criminology contending that location in the social structure, namely poverty and social class, are what really matter. Pure deprivation or materialist theories are not just antediluvian but wrong by offenders’ own accounts. Our recent work even questions the idea that some inferred from *Crime in the Making*—that institutional turning points are purely exogenous events that act on individuals. The men we studied in *Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives* were not blank slates any more than they were rational actors in

an unconstrained market of life chances. They were active participants in constructing interdependent lives—including turning points themselves.

From our perspective, then, it is especially important to reconcile the idea of choice or will with a structuralist notion of turning points. As Abbott has written, "A major turning point has the potential to open a system the way a key has the potential to open a lock...action is necessary to complete the turning" (1997: 102). In this instance, individual action needs to align with the social structure in order to produce behavioral change and to maintain change (or stability) over the life course. Choice alone without structural support, or the offering of support alone absent a decision to desist, however inchoate, seems destined to fail. What this means is that neither agency nor structure alone are capable of explaining the life course of crime (Wikström, 2004). Studying them simultaneously, as we have done, allows the possibility of discovering common themes in the ways that turning points across the adult life course align with individual decisions. To more process-oriented, non-reductionist, and generalized accounts of within-individual change, the field of life-course criminology might therefore profitably turn.

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