CHAPTER 14

Desistance from Crime over the Life Course*

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There is no shortage of explanations in the field of criminology for the onset of criminal behavior, which is typically assumed to occur in childhood or early adolescence. What is not known with much certainty is why some offenders *stop* committing crimes when they do, while others continue over large portions of the life course. What accounts for stability and change in patterns of criminal offending over time? Unfortunately, the longitudinal studies needed to answer this central question are virtually non-existent. Most criminological research consists of cross-sectional "snapshots" or relatively short-term panel studies of offending. Long-term studies that follow the same individuals over time are as rare as they are difficult to carry out.

In this chapter we address these issues by examining a theoretical taxonomy of explanations for desistance from crime.† We organize our discussion by presenting and critiquing four conceptual accounts that have been prominently advanced to explain desistance from crime—maturation, development, rational choice, and social learning. We then present an integrated

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†Although we seek to paint a fairly broad theoretical picture, our research base is considerably more detailed. For a traditional "review of the literature" on desistance from crime and other problem behavior, see our in-depth treatment in Laub and Sampson (2001).

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account based on the core principles of life course inquiry, building in large part from our previous research on crime across the life course (Sampson & Laub, 1993). We believe that a life course perspective offers the most compelling and unifying framework for understanding the processes underlying continuity (persistence) and change (desistance) in criminal behavior over the life span. Before addressing specific theoretical accounts, however, we must first confront the relevant facts about crime and key definitional issues surrounding the concept of desistance.

DEFINING THE PROBLEM

Drawing on the accumulation of criminological research to date, we believe there is consensus on several important findings relating to offending patterns over time. Any reasonable theory of desistance from crime must be able to accommodate the following facts.

1. The prevalence of crime declines with age, although there is more variability in the age distribution across offense types than is commonly believed (Steffensmeier, Allan, Harer, & Streifel, 1989). Typically, criminal offending begins in preadolescence, peaks sharply during adolescence, and rapidly declines in the transition to young adulthood.
2. The incidence of crime does not necessarily decline with age and may in fact increase with age for certain types of crime and subgroups of offenders (Blumstein, Cohen, Roth, & Visher, 1986; Farrington, 1986; but see Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983).
3. There appears to be substantial continuity in offending from childhood to adolescence and from adolescence into adulthood, with the earlier the onset of criminal activity, the longer the criminal career (Blumstein et al., 1986; Robins, 1966; Wolfgang, Figlio, & Sellin, 1972).
4. Despite this continuity, there is a great deal of heterogeneity in criminal behavior over the life span. Cline (1980) argued that although there is "more constancy than change ... there is sufficient change in all the data to preclude simple conclusions concerning criminal career progressions" (p. 665). Cline (1980, pp. 669–670) concluded, rightfully we suggest, that there is far more heterogeneity in criminal behavior than previous work has suggested and that many juvenile offenders do not go on to become career offenders. Loeber and LeBlanc (1990) made a similar point: "Against the backdrop of continuity, studies also show large within-individual changes in offending" (p. 390).
5. Finally, the literature focusing directly on desistance from crime indicates that there are multiple pathways. Some of the most important elements in the desistance process appear to be attachment to a conventional person such as a spouse, stable employment, transformation of personal identity, and the aging process. Moreover, the predictors and processes of desistance do not seem to vary much by offender characteristics or type of crime (see Laub & Sampson [2001] for a complete review).

As Rutter (1988, p. 3) pointed out, a major unanswered question is whether the predictors of desistance are unique or simply the opposite of predictors leading to offending. One school of thought argues that the predictors of desistance are the reverse of risk factors predicting offending (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; LeBlanc & Loeber, 1993, p. 247). On the other hand, Farrington (1992) contends that the onset of delinquency is due to changes in social influence from parents to peers and that desistance is due to changes in social influence from peers to spouses. The implication is that the predictors of desistance may be distinguished from the

predictors of the onset of crime. There is evidence for this "desistance" position as found in Glueck and Glueck's (1943) research on criminal careers conducted in the 1930s and 1940s. Uggen and Piliavin (1998) refer to this idea as "asymmetrical causation."

In short, despite some promising leads and an accumulation of facts on age and crime, much remains to be discovered about the *processes* of desistance from criminal behavior across various stages of the life course. We maintain that to understand desistance from criminal behavior requires a theory of crime and the criminal "offender." Crime is typically defined as a violation of societal rules of behavior that are embodied in law. When officially recognized, such violations may evoke sanctions by the state. Deviance is typically defined as violations of social norms or generally accepted standards of society (i.e., institutionalized expectations). Even given these definitions, the operational definition of an "offender" remains ambiguous, as does the point at which persistent offending or desistance occurs. Therefore, before we begin our review of the explanations of desistance from crime, we need to take a closer look at the term itself.

IS DESISTANCE A MEANINGFUL TERM?

Defined as ceasing to do something, desistance from crime is commonly acknowledged in the research literature. Most offenders, after all, eventually stop offending. Yet there is relatively little conceptualization about crime cessation. As Maruna (2001) notes, "Desistance from crime is an unusual dependent variable for criminologists because it is not an event that happens, rather it is the sustained *absence* of a certain type of event (in this case, crime)" (p. 17). Compounding this lack of conceptual clarity is the confounding of desistance with aging. It is well known that crime declines with age in the aggregate population (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). The decline of recidivism with age led Hoffman and Beck (1984, p. 621) to argue for the existence of an age-related "burnout" phenomenon. These authors found that rates of recidivism decline with increased age and that this relationship persists after controlling for other factors linked to recidivism (e.g., prior criminal record). Moreover, there is evidence that offenders' fear of doing time in prison becomes especially acute with age (see Shover, 1996).

Several additional questions remain unanswered. For example, can desistance occur after one act of crime? If so, are the processes of desistance from a single act of crime different from desistance after several acts of crime? Is there such a thing as "spontaneous remission" and, if so, can the term be precisely defined? Stall and Biernacki (1986) defined spontaneous remission as desistance that occurs absent of any external intervention. How can "genuine desistance" be distinguished from "false desistance"? How long a follow-up period is needed to establish desistance? Baskin and Sommers (1998) argue that a 2-year hiatus indicates "temporary cessation" and is a long enough period to consider the "processes that initiate and sustain desistance" (p. 143). Yet how does one distinguish "intermittency in offending" from "true desistance"? For instance, Elliott, Huizinga, and Menard (1989, p. 118) employ the term suspension because suspension implies either temporary or permanent cessation. Farrington (1986) stated that "even a five-year or ten-year crime-free period is no guarantee that offending has terminated" (p. 201). And in fact, Barnett, Blumstein, and Farrington (1989) found a small group of offenders who stopped offending and then restarted after a long period of time.

In a similar vein, if offending ceases, but problem behavior remains or increases, what does that say about desistance? Weitekamp and Kerner (1994) make the point that "Desistance

of crime could quite contrary be considered as a process which may lead to other forms of socially deviant, unwanted or personally dreadful problems" (p. 448). Some offenders, even though they desist from criminal activity, continue to engage in a variety of acts that are considered "deviant" or the functional equivalents of crime (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). For example, they may drink alcohol excessively, have children out of wedlock, "loaf" instead of work, gamble, and congregate in bars. Can these people accurately be called desisters? Perhaps from the narrow confines of the criminal justice system they are, but from a theoretical vantage point, they display traits that imply little change in their antisocial trajectory.

Conceptual Framework

Although answers to these questions are difficult, we believe that some ground rules are possible and in fact necessary before meaningful research can proceed. We believe it is first important to distinguish termination of offending from the concept of desistance. Termination is the point in time at which one stops criminal activity, whereas desistance is the causal process that supports the termination of offending. While it is difficult to ascertain when the process of desistance actually begins, it is apparent that it continues after the termination of offending. In our view, the process of desistance maintains the continued state of non-offending. Thus, both termination and the process of desistance need to be considered in understanding cessation from offending. By using different terms for these distinct phenomena, we separate termination (the outcome) from the dynamics underlying the process of desistance (the cause), which have been hopelessly confounded in the literature to date.

The termination of offending is characterized by the absence of continued offending (a non-event). Unlike, say, stopping smoking, where setting a specific quit date is so important, criminal offenders typically do not set a date to quit offending. The actual period of time necessary to establish that termination has occurred is a sticky issue, but one that is possible to overcome. For example, in the criminal career literature, the end of the criminal career is defined as the age at which the last crime is committed. Thus, it seems reasonable to specify the date of last crime as the point of termination of offending, recognizing that there are serious measurement problems in ascertaining if in fact a person has stopped committing crimes after a certain point.

Desistance, by contrast, evolves over time in a process. According to Vaughan (1986), "uncoupling" is the process of divorce and separation. The process of uncoupling occurs prior to, during, and after divorce. Like desistance, uncoupling is not abrupt, but a gradual transition out of an intimate relationship. Similar to quitting smoking or uncoupling (Fisher, Lichtenstein, Haire-Joshu, Morgan, & Rehberg, 1993; Vaughan, 1986), we would similarly argue that desistance is best viewed as a process rather than a discrete event. The process is a social transition that entails identity transformation, for example, from a smoker to a non-smoker, or from a married/coupled person, to a divorced/uncoupled person, or from an offender to a non-offender. Also, like quitting smoking or uncoupling, desistance is not an irreversible transition.

Because low rate offending is so common, especially during adolescence, we further argue that criminologists will not learn much more than is already known about the near ubiquity of delinquency during the teen years. Following this logic, it does not seem fruitful for criminologists to spend much time studying termination or desistance for low rate adolescent offenders (defined as involvement in a single event or a series of relatively isolated events in the teenage years). Furthermore, it follows that termination and desistance should be studied

among those who reach some reasonable threshold of frequent and serious criminal offending. The precise details of measurement depend upon the data set and the research question under investigation. For example, we have argued for a focus on desistance from persistent and serious delinquency, operationalized in our own research using a delinquent group of 500 formerly incarcerated juveniles with lengthy and serious criminal records (Sampson & Laub, 1993).

Finally, whether or not one embraces the criminal career paradigm (Blumstein et al., 1986), good theories of crime ought to account for the onset, continuation, and desistance from criminal behavior across the life span. At the heart of this focus on persistence and desistance is a conceptualization of stability and change over the life course. Consider that desistance can occur when there is a change in criminal propensity or a change in opportunities to commit crime. Is desistance related to one or both of these domains? Defining criminality as the stable propensity to offend, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) argue that desistance occurs when there is a change in the opportunity to offend. In their view, criminality is stable over the life course and, thus, cannot account for desistance from crime. Like Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), we maintain that crime changes over time (Sampson & Laub, 1993), but we also contend that opportunities for crime are ubiquitous (Sampson & Laub, 1995). However, so far we have been silent as to whether criminality (propensity) changes or remains stable over time, although we imply that traits like self-control can change over time as a consequence of changes in the quality or strength of social ties. Ultimately, the concern with propensity (assuming that such an entity exists) may not be an important issue in the study of crime over the life course. LeBlanc and Loeber (1998), for example, recognize that "manifestations of deviancy in the course of individuals' lives may change, while the underlying propensity for deviancy may remain stable" (p. 179). We believe the focus ought to be on the heterogeneity of criminal behavior over the life span and not some unobserved latent concept.*

EXPLANATIONS OF DESISTANCE FROM CRIME

There are two distinct models in the criminological literature that have been applied to the desistance phenomenon. One stems from the idea of *population heterogeneity*. This perspective argues that behavior over the life course is a reflection of differences that vary between persons (usually, but not necessarily, individual differences or "traits") and that are established early in life with consequent stability over time. For example, Nagin and Paternoster (2000) argue that "there may be differences between individuals in socialization, personality, or biological/constitutional attributes which makes crime more likely over time" (p. 119). Once identified, time-stable traits like self-control, temperament, and intelligence are posited to account for continuity in antisocial behavior—indeed, all behavior—over time.

A second process involves the idea of *state dependence*. According to this model, past behavior causally influences future events and these events can in turn affect current and future behavior. For example, getting arrested because of criminal behavior may weaken one's future employment prospects, which in turn leads to an increased risk for later crime. As Nagin and Paternoster (2000, p. 118) point out, "committing crimes has the two-pronged effect of both weakening restraints/inhibitions and strengthening incentives for additional criminal behavior."

*In our view, there is an implicit theory underlying the concept of propensity—the positing of fixed attributes that are related to crime yet never observed.

What is lacking in both these models, however, is a reasonable and persuasive explanation of change in behavior. Theories of change in behavior – in our case, desistance from crime—are less developed than theories of the onset and continuation in crime. As one can see from the models described above, the idea of change is problematic. For instance, if individuals share the same individual traits that increase their propensity to crime and these traits are stable over time, how can one explain differential desistance from criminal behavior? Similarly, if current criminal activity has a causal effect on subsequent criminality, as argued in the state dependence model, then how can one explain how criminals stop offending? In short, the population heterogeneity and state dependence models emphasize one side of the coin—continuity in offending—and do not provide much insight into the processes of change. Combining the processes of population heterogeneity and state dependence is a step in the right direction, but it too begs the issue of change. What is the process of change if persistent heterogeneity and state dependence are present? If the idea of state dependence is that "criminal behavior has a genuine causal effect on subsequent criminality by eroding constraints and strengthening incentives to crime" (Nagin & Paternoster, 2000, p. 117), it is not clear how "state dependence can also explain why there is change or cessation in offending over time" (Nagin & Paternoster, 2000, p. 127).* Ultimately, the only way for models of population heterogeneity and state dependence to provide an adequate explanation of continuity and change in criminal behavior is to adopt a typological approach or one that argues that different offenders have different causal pathways to crime and as a result different prospects for desistance. We return to this crucial point below.

FRAMEWORKS FOR UNDERSTANDING THE DESISTANCE PROCESS

To explain change in offending over time we turn to several conceptual accounts of desistance from crime. While there is overlap across these frameworks, we highlight what we see as the differing elements of emphasis within each framework. We make the case that the life course perspective is the most promising approach for advancing the state of knowledge regarding continuity (persistence in) and change (desistance) in crime *and* other problem behaviors.

Maturation and Aging Accounts of Desistance

The Gluecks developed the idea of maturation as the key factor in explaining desistance from crime. Their theory was that "the physical and mental changes which enter into the natural process of *maturation* offer a chief explanation of improvement of conduct with the passing of years" (Glueck & Glueck, 1974, p. 149). Desistance occurred with the passage of time, specifically, there was a "decline in recidivism during the late twenties and early thirties" (Glueck & Glueck, 1974, p. 175). Thus, for the Gluecks, desistance was normative and expected unless an offender had serious biological or environmental deficits. At the same time, the Gluecks argued that persistent recidivism could be explained by a lack of maturity:

*Extant theories employing the idea of state dependence predict, all else equal, that crime will generate more crime, thus, leading to continuity in offending over time. For example, labeling theory (Lemert, 1972), social learning theory (Akers, 1998), general strain theory (Agnew, 1992), interactional theory (Thornberry, 1987), and the theory of cumulative disadvantage (Sampson & Laub, 1997) all seem to predict escalating crime.

offenders who eventually desisted experienced delayed or belated maturation. Although perhaps tautological in nature, the Gluecks argued that the men under study "finally achieved enough integration and stability to make their intelligence and emotional–volitional equipment effective in convincing them that crime does not lead to satisfaction and in enhancing their capacity for self-control" (1974, p. 170).

The Gluecks believed that maturation was a complex concept and process. They wrote that maturation "embraces the development of a stage of physical, intellectual, and affective capacity and stability, and a sufficient degree of integration of all major constituents of temperament, personality and intelligence to be adequate to the demands and restrictions of life in organized society" (Glueck & Glueck, 1974, p. 170). The Gluecks were quite clear that desistance "cannot be attributed to external environmental transformations" (p. 173). The Gluecks called for more research into the "striking maturation" phenomenon from biological, psychological, and sociological perspectives, with the goal to "dissect maturation into its components" (p. 270). Interestingly, for the Gluecks age and maturation were not one and the same. It was the case that as age increased, recidivism declined. However, age alone was not enough to explain maturation. "It was not the achievement of any particular age, but rather the achievement of adequate maturation regardless of the chronological age at which it occurred that was the significant influence in the behavior change of our criminals" (Glueck & Glueck, 1945, p. 81). Nonetheless, the basic idea of this approach is that desistance is the result of offenders growing out of crime and settling down.

A variation of the Gluecks approach is found in Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) *A general theory of crime*. Like the Gluecks, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) argue that crime declines with age for all offenders (see also Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983). Gottfredson and Hirschi contend that the age distribution of crime—including onset, frequency, and desistance—is, for all intents and purposes, "invariant" across time, space, and historical context and, therefore, cannot be explained by variables currently proposed in mainstream criminology (e.g., poverty, subculture). Gottfredson and Hirschi state, "This explanation suggests that maturational reform is just that, change in behavior that comes with maturation; it suggests that spontaneous desistance is just that, change in behavior that cannot be explained and change that occurs regardless of what else happens" (1990, p. 136).

A fundamental aspect of the Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) account of desistance is the distinction between crime and criminality. According to Gottfredson and Hirschi crimes are short-term, circumscribed events that presuppose a set of conditions. In contrast, criminality refers to relatively stable differences across individuals in the propensity to commit crime. Gottfredson and Hirschi go on to argue that, while crime everywhere declines with age, criminality—differences in propensities, like self-control—remain relatively stable over the life course. They write, "Desistance theory asserts that crime declines with age because of factors associated with age that reduce or change the criminality of the actor. The age theory asserts that crime, independent of criminality, declines with age" (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, p. 137). For Gottfredson and Hirschi criminality was impervious to institutional involvement and impact.

Unlike the Gluecks, Gottfredson and Hirschi do not invoke the process of maturation, but rather a direct effect of age on crime. Decreases in offending over time are "due to the inexorable aging of the organism" (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990, p. 141). From this theoretical perspective, it follows that criminal behavior is largely unaffected by life course events—marriage, employment, education, etc.—or any situational or institutional influences. The problem with maturational or "ontogenetic" accounts, well noted by Dannefer (1984), is that they do not really offer an explanation—things are thought to just "naturally" happen. The

basic idea is that desistance "just happens" and that the age effect cannot be explained with the available terms and concepts.

Developmental Accounts of Desistance

A similar problem is seen in developmental accounts that are rooted in ontogenetic reasoning (Dannefer, 1984). One explanation is that identity changes account for reductions and cessation in crime (see Maruna, 2001; see also Gartner & Piliavin, 1988; Shover, 1996). Mulvey and LaRosa (1986) focus on the period from age 17 to 20, the period they call the time of "natural" recovery. They argue that desistance is the result of shifts in behavioral patterns that characterize adolescence, especially late adolescence (see Mulvey & Aber, [1988] for details on this developmental perspective). This process is similar to the one advanced by Shover (1996) in his study of behavioral shifts in response to aging among men involved in crime. Such accounts of desistance suggest two themes.

1. Desistance is normative (ontogenetic) and expected across the life span. Some "rough and tumble" toddlers will desist from antisocial behavior as they enter school, some adolescent delinquents will desist while in high school, and some older delinquents will desist as they make the transition to young adulthood, and so on.
2. Cognitive change is a precursor to behavioral change. What Maruna (2001) calls "identity deconstruction" is necessary to begin the long-term process of desistance.

A second developmental account of desistance is offered by Gove (1985). He argues that explanations of the cessation of various forms of crime and deviance must incorporate biological, psychological, and sociological variables. Like Hirschi and Gottfredson (1983), Gove (1985) maintains that sociological theories of crime are unable to explain the patterns of desistance revealed in the data. Gove (1985) reviewed six sociological theories of deviance, including labeling, conflict, differential association, control, anomie, and functional theory and concluded that "all of these theoretical perspectives either explicitly or implicitly suggest that deviant behavior is an amplifying process leading to further and more serious deviance" (p. 118). By contrast, changes in socially structured roles, psychological wellbeing, psychological maturation, and biological factors such as physical strength, physical energy, psychological drive, and the need for stimulation provide reasonable accounts of desistance from crime with age. Gove (1985) concludes that "biological and psychological factors appear to play a critical role in the termination of deviant behavior" (p. 136). The peak and decline in physical strength, energy, psychological drive, and the need for stimulation maps fairly well the peak and decline in deviant behavior.

A third and the most influential developmental account of persistence in and desistance from crime is offered by Moffitt (1993, 1994). Moffitt spells out two distinct categories of individuals, each possessing a unique natural history of antisocial behavior over the life course. From a desistance standpoint, what is important is that these two antisocial trajectories have unique etiologies that in part account for the differences in desistance. Life-course persistent offenders start early in childhood and persist in offending well into adulthood. For this small group of offenders, neuropsychological deficits in conjunction with disrupted attachment relationships and academic failure drive long-term antisocial behaviors. Simply put, life-course persistent offenders do not desist from crime. As Moffitt states, it is not the traits or the environment per se that account for continuity. Rather her theory of continuous antisocial behavior (and by definition, no desistance) "emphasizes the constant *process* of

reciprocal interaction between personal traits and environmental reactions to them" (Moffitt, 1994, p. 28). Antisocial dispositions infiltrate into all domains of adolescence and adulthood and this "diminishes the likelihood of change" (Moffitt, 1994, p. 28).

Adolescence-limited offenders are involved in antisocial behavior only during adolescence. This large group of offenders has no history of antisocial behavior in childhood. The delinquency of the adolescence-limited group is situational and, as a result, virtually all of these offenders desist from criminal behavior over time. Adolescence-limited offenders seek to enjoy the spoils of adulthood (what Moffitt calls the maturity gap) and they mimic the antisocial styles of life-course persisters and, in turn, they are socially reinforced by the "negative consequences" of delinquent behavior (Moffitt, 1994, pp. 30–33). Adolescence-limited offenders desist from crime in response to changing contingencies and reinforcements. For the adolescence-limited group, desistance, like delinquency, is normative. Because adolescence-limiteds have no history of childhood antisocial behavior resulting from neuropsychological deficits, the forces of cumulative continuity are much weaker. Simultaneously, adolescence-limited offenders have more prosocial skills, more academic achievement, and stronger attachments than their life-course persistent counterparts, characteristics that facilitate desistance from crime.

In sum, Moffitt (1994) argues that "the age of desistance from criminal offending will be a function of age of onset of antisocial behavior, mastery of conventional prosocial skills, and the number and severity of "snares" encountered during the foray into delinquency. Snares are consequences of crime, such as incarceration or injury, that constrain conventional behavior" (p. 45). "Adolescence-limited delinquents can profit from opportunities for desistance, because they retain the option of successfully resuming a conventional lifestyle. Life-course-persistent delinquents may make transitions into marriage or work, but their injurious childhoods make it less likely that they can leave their past selves behind" (Moffitt, 1994, p. 45).

Rational Choice Accounts of Desistance

The main idea of the rational choice framework is that the decision to continue or give up crime is based on a conscious reappraisal of the costs and benefits of crime (see Clarke & Cornish, 1985; Cornish & Clarke, 1986; & Gartner & Piliavin, 1988). According to this perspective, persisters and desisters are seen as "reasoning decisionmakers" (Cornish & Clarke, 1986, p. 13). One important component of this decision is the increasing fear of punishment with aging, as discussed above (see also Cromwell, Olson, & Avary, 1991). However, as we have seen, aging is not necessarily tied to the decision to give up crime.

Some researchers have tried to understand the context of rational decisions to stop offending. For example, Cusson and Pinsonneault (1986) contend that the decision to give up crime is triggered by a "shock" of some sort (e.g., a shoot out during a crime) or "delayed deterrence" (e.g., increased fear of doing more time) or both. Cusson and Pinsonneault (1986, p. 78) found the decision to give up crime was "voluntary and autonomous." These findings are highly speculative, as conceded by the authors, since the study was based primarily on interviews with 17 ex-robbers in Canada. In a similar vein, Leibrich (1996) studied 37 men and women in New Zealand who were on probation and in the process of going straight. She found that shame was the primary factor in the desistance process in that it was the most commonly identified cost of offending. Three kinds of shame were reported: public humiliation, personal disgrace, and private remorse. As Leibrich (1996, p. 297) stated, "shame was the thing which most often dissuaded people from offending and the growth of self-respect was

the thing which most often persuaded them to go straight." In another interesting study, Paternoster (1989) integrated deterrence and rational choice perspectives in an attempt to understand decisions to participate in and desist from delinquency (i.e., marijuana use, drinking liquor, petty theft, and vandalism). Drawing on data from 1,250 high school students surveyed at three points in time, Paternoster (1989) found that the decision to desist was not related to formal sanction threats (e.g., the perceived severity and certainty of punishment). Decisions to desist were instead related to changes in moral tolerance of the delinquent act. Those offenders who made a decision to stop offending began to have stronger moral reservations about the illegal acts in question. This finding held for all four delinquent offenses. It is noteworthy that changes in moral beliefs were associated with changes in peer delinquency and the degree of peer support for delinquency. Whether changes in moral beliefs and tolerance can be properly understood to support rational choice theory is questionable. What seems important to know is *why* individuals underwent changes in their moral reasoning.

Social Learning Accounts of Desistance

Social learning has been offered as an integrative framework to provide explanations of desistance from crime and other forms of problem behavior. In fact, Akers (1990) forcefully argued that social learning accounts incorporate all of the major elements of rational choice and deterrence frameworks, including moral reasoning. One of the strengths of the social learning approach is its application to all crime types as well as illicit drug use, alcohol abuse, and other problem behaviors (see Akers [1998], for an extensive review of the research literature).

In the social learning framework, the basic variables that explain initiation into crime are the same variables that account for cessation from crime. That is, for the most part, the account of desistance is the account of initiation in reverse. For example, differential association with non-criminal friends and significant others, less exposure to or opportunities to model or imitate criminal behavior, developing definitions and attitudes favorable to conformity and abiding by the law, and differential reinforcement (social and non-social) discouraging continued involvement in crime are all part of the desistance story. Imitation appears less important after onset while social and non-social reinforcements become more important (see Akers, 1998). As for onset and continuation, the most important factor in desistance is peer associations.

In perhaps the most important application of social learning theory to desistance, Warr (1993) argued that differential association accounts for the decline in crime with age. Using data from the first five waves of the National Youth Survey for respondents aged 11–21, he found that peer associations (e.g., exposure to delinquent peers, time spent with peers, and loyalty to peers) changed dramatically with age. With respect to desistance, declines in crime were linked with declines in peer associations. When peer variables were controlled, "the association between age and crime is substantially weakened and, for some offenses, disappears entirely" (Warr, 1993, p. 35). Along similar lines, Warr (1998) argued that changing peer relations account for the association between marital status and desistance from crime. Using longitudinal data, again from the National Youth Survey, he found that the transition to marriage is followed by "a dramatic decline in time spent with friends" and "reduced exposure to delinquent peers" (Warr, 1998, p. 183). Warr concludes that marriage is important because of its effect on peer influences, a finding consistent with social learning theory but also other perspectives. For example, marriage may lead to the greater social control of men (Sampson & Laub, 1993), there by explaining their desistance. To fully understand desistance we thus need to better understand mediating social processes.

A LIFE COURSE ACCOUNT OF DESISTANCE

We believe that a life course perspective offers the most compelling and unifying framework for understanding the processes underlying continuity (persistence) and change (desistance) in criminal behavior over the life span. According to Elder (1998), the life course perspective contains several principles: (1) a focus on the historical time and place that recognizes that lives are embedded and shaped by context, (2) the recognition that the developmental impact of life events is contingent on when they occur in a person's life, that is timing matters, (3) the acknowledgment of intergenerational transmission of social patterns-- the notion of linked lives and interdependency, and (4) the view that human agency plays a key role in choice making and constructing one's life course. The major objective of the life course perspective is to link social history and social structure to the unfolding of human lives. A life course perspective thus looks to within-individual variations over time, regardless of whether one is interested in understanding persistence or desistance in crime.

Applying the life course framework to the study of desistance leads to a focus on continuity and change in criminal behavior over time, especially its embeddedness in historical and other contextual features of social life. We took such a position in our book, *Crime in the making: Pathways and turning points through life* (Sampson & Laub, 1993), where we developed and tested a theory of crime over the life course using a unique data archive—the *Unraveling juvenile delinquency* study and subsequent follow-ups conducted by Sheldon Glueck 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. Gluecks' (1950) data were derived from a three-wave prospective study of juvenile and adult criminal behavior that originated with *Unraveling juvenile delinquency* (1950; see also Glueck and Glueck, (1968) *Delinquents and nondelinquents in perspective*). The research design involved a sample of 500 male delinquents ages 10–17 and 500 male non-delinquents 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. We reconstructed and analyzed the full longitudinal data set.

In the resulting *Crime in the making* (Sampson & Laub, 1993), we developed an age-graded theory of informal social control to explain childhood antisocial behavior, adolescent delinquency, and crime in adulthood. Our theory emphasized the importance of social ties and bonds to society at all ages across the life course. The organizing principle was that crime and deviance are more likely to occur when an individual's bond to society is weak or broken. We highlighted the role of informal social controls that emerge from the role reciprocities and structure of interpersonal bonds linking members of society to one another and to wider institutions such as work, family, school, and community. The first building block in our life course theory focused on the mediating role of informal family and school social bonds in explaining child and adolescent delinquency (Sampson & Laub, 1993, Chs 4 and 5). The second building block incorporated the role of continuity in childhood problem behavior that extends into adulthood across a variety of life's domains, such as crime, alcohol abuse, divorce, and unemployment (Sampson & Laub, 1993, Ch. 6). The third building block examined change in antisocial behavior over time. A fundamental theme of our age-graded theory of informal social control and crime is that, while individual traits and childhood experiences are important for understanding behavioral trajectories, experiences in adolescence and adulthood can redirect those trajectories in either a more positive or more negative manner. Our theory thus incorporates both stability and change in criminal behavior over the life course.

The logical question of interest then is what factors explain stability and change over the life course? In *Crime in the making* (Sampson & Laub, 1993), we examined the predictors of desistance and persistence in adult crime and violence and found that despite differences in early childhood experiences, adult social bonds to work and family had similar consequences for the life course trajectories of the 500 delinquents and 500 non-delinquent controls we studied. More precisely, 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 non-delinquent controls. We concluded that "turning points" related to work, marriage, and military service were crucial for understanding processes of continuity and change across the adult life course (see also Laub & Sampson, 1993; Sampson & Laub, 1993, 1996). A number of recent studies have confirmed the predictive power of social ties, such as marital bonds, for explaining desistance from crime (Farrington & West, 1995; Horney, Osgood, & Marshall, 1995; Warr, 1998).

CONCLUSION

The life course approach offers a number of advantages over the traditional accounts of desistance from crime noted above, even developmental perspectives.* Developmental accounts, from developmental psychology, focus on regular or law-like individual development over the life span. Implicit in developmental approaches are the notions of stages, progressions, growth, and evolution (Dannefer, 1984; Lewontin, 2000). The resulting emphasis is systematic pathways of development (change) over time, with the imagery being one of the execution of a program written at an earlier point in time. Although there are aspects of developmental approaches that rely on pure population heterogeneity models, some developmental theorists, such as Moffitt explicitly recognize the possibility of change. Still, change is usually explained by childhood characteristics and experiences—some people are simply more programmed early on for change than others. *In other words, desistance is possible only for those with the "right" characteristics that were previously determined.* Developmental models are thus ultimately forced to assume that there are "groups" or "types" of offenders (e.g., life course persisters) that display distinct and different causal pathways and probabilities of continuity and change, even if the manifestations of these pathways vary by age.

In contrast, life course approaches, while incorporating individual differences and notions of law-like development such as aging, emphasize variability and exogenous influences on the course of development over time that cannot be predicted by focusing solely on enduring individual traits (population heterogeneity models) or even past experiences (state dependence models). Flowing mainly from sociology and history, life course accounts embrace the notion that lives are often unpredictable and dynamic and that exogenously induced changes are ever present. Some changes in life course result from chance or random events, while other changes stem from macro-level "shocks" largely beyond the pale of individual choice (e.g., war, depression, natural disasters, revolutions, plant closings, industrial restructuring). Another important aspect of life course criminology is a focus on situations and time-varying social contexts that impede or facilitate criminal events.

*The life course perspective can also be distinguished from a criminal career perspective. We regard the life course perspective as broader in scope and driven by theoretical rather than policy concerns. In contrast, the criminal career model is largely atheoretical and more concerned with developing policy about "career criminals" than theory about "criminal careers."

At the end of the day, however, the fundamental difference from developmental (especially psychological) accounts is the theoretical commitment to the idea of social malleability across the life course and the focus on the constancy of change, including the dynamic processes that serve to reproduce stability socially (Dannefer, 1984). A life course focus recognizes emergent properties and rejects the metaphor of "unfolding" that is inextricably part of the developmental paradigm. To be more specific, like Lewontin (2000) we reject the idea of determinism and "ontogenetic" predictability from childhood factors. It follows that we must reject the pure version of the so-called "population heterogeneity" models. We argue that the traits that are at the heart of this perspective, whether derived from genetics or childhood experiences, do not sufficiently predict behavior over the long haul. In our view, the full life course matters, especially postchildhood, adolescence, and adult experiences.* We are also compelled to reject the pure version of "state dependence." Although state dependence models improve upon population heterogeneity models, they too do not sufficiently account for change—there are simply too many outcomes that cannot be explained by focusing on the past.

Although the life course perspective can be integrated with several criminological theories (e.g., social control, social learning, and rational choice), for both theoretical and empirical reasons noted above, we favor a modified version of social control theory. Because of its explicit focus on lives in social context, we believe that a life course perspective integrated with an age-graded theory of informal social control offers a means of understanding onset, continuation, *and* desistance from criminal behavior (see Sampson & Laub [1993] for background). We would thus argue for a focus on the structural sources of both continuity and change and their role in the processes of persistence in and desistance from crime. Drawing inspiration from the life course paradigm, the idea of "turning points" plays a central role in such accounts, especially when linked to the interaction of human agency, situations, and historical context.

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*This view is consistent with recent research in the health area. For instance, Lamont et al. (2000) found that adult lifestyle and biological risk markers measured in adulthood explained more variance in cardiovascular disease risk than the direct and indirect contributions of early childhood experiences.

†We emphasize, however, that there remain critical unresolved issues and important data limitations that have hampered the progress of life course criminology. These issues are beyond the scope of the present paper. For a detailed discussion, see Laub and Sampson (2001).

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