Lecture Notes

# Chapter 12: Developmental/Life-Course Perspectives of Criminality

**Learning Objectives**

* Discuss how developmental or life-course theories differ from other theoretical perspectives presented in this book
* Explain how various concepts or factors that are important in life-course/developmental perspectives, such as onset, frequency of offenses, duration of offending, seriousness of the offenses, desistence of offending, etc., play key roles in when individuals offend and why they do so at certain times in their lives
* Identify some of the primary criticisms or weaknesses of the life-course/developmental perspective, as well as which theories are clearly “antidevelopmental”
* Identify which specific theories in the developmental/life-course genre seem best to account for specific transitions or trajectories either toward or away from crime
* Describe the theories that account for different types of offenders, such as chronic or habitual offenders versus individuals who offend only during certain times in their lives
* Summarize some of the key policy implications of developmental/life-course theories

**Summary**

This chapter presented a discussion of the importance of developmental or life-course theories of criminal behavior. This is one of the most cutting-edge areas of theoretical development, and life-course theories are likely to be the most important frameworks in the future of the field of criminological theory. Developmental or life-course theory focuses on the individual and following such individuals throughout life to examine their offending careers. This perspective puts a lot of emphasis on life events, often referred to as transitions, which significantly affect an individual’s trajectory in criminal behavior. Life-course perspectives emphasize such concepts as onset, frequency of offending, duration of offending, seriousness of offending, desistence of offending, and other factors that play key roles in when individuals offend and why they did so—or did not do so—at certain times of their lives. There are many critics of the developmental or life-course perspective, particularly those who buy into the low self-control model, which is antidevelopmental in the sense that is assumes that propensities for crime do not change over time, but rather remain unchanged across life.

One of the developmental models that have received the most attention is that by Sampson and Laub, which emphasizes transitions in life that alter trajectories either toward or away from crime. Moffitt’s developmental theory of chronic offenders (which she labeled life-course persistent offenders) versus more normal offenders (which she labeled adolescence-limited offenders) is the developmental model that has received the most attention over the last decade, and much of this research is supportive of the interactive effects of biology and environment combining to create chronic, habitual offenders. Another key developmental theory is Thornberry’s Interactional Model, which emphasizes different types of influences of certain factors at different times of our development, as well as the reciprocal or “feedback” effects of certain outcome variables on previous antecedent factors. This type of “feedback loop” can often result in a person being caught in a vicious cycle of criminality, which can be very hard to get out of.

In this chapter, we also examined the policy implications of this developmental approach, which emphasized the need to provide universal care for pregnant mothers, as well as their newborn children. Other policy implications included legally mandated interventions for mothers who are addicted to toxic substances (e.g., alcohol and drugs) and assignment of caseworkers for high-risk infants and children, such as those with birth or delivery complications. Such interventions would go a long way toward saving society the many problems (e.g., financial and victimization) that will persist without such interventions. Ultimately, a focus on the earliest stages of intervention will pay off the most and will provide the “biggest bang for the buck.”

**Chapter Outline**

* **Basic Concepts and Early Developmental Theory**
  + Developmental theories are distinguished by their emphasis on the evolution of individuals’ criminality over time.
  + Developmental theories tend to look at the individual as the unit of analysis, and such models focus on the various aspects of the onset, frequency, intensity, persistence/duration, desistence, and other aspects of the individual’s criminal career.
    - The onset of offending is when the offender first begins offending, and desistence is when an individual stops committing crime.
      * Early onset is one of the most important predictors of any of the measures we have in determining who is most at risk for developing serious, violent offending behavior.
    - Frequency refers to how often the individual offends at certain times, whereas intensity is the degree of seriousness of the offenses he or she commits at certain times in their offending career.
      * Perhaps the most discussed and researched aspect of developmental theory is that of offender frequency, which has been referred to as lambda.
        + Estimates of lambda vary greatly.

Some estimates of lambda are in the high single digits and some are in the triple digits.

The frequency of offending, even within crime type, varies so widely across individuals that we question its use in understanding criminal careers.

* + - Persistence or duration involves the length of an individual’s criminal career in terms of time from onset to their final offense.
      * Additionally, persistence or duration of offending has become one of the most researched components of the developmental perspective.
  + Virtually all studies on life-course/developmental perspective show that most individuals who are arrested, never are arrested again.
    - However, for those who offend many times, a certain pattern emerges.
      * This pattern involves an escalation from minor status offending (usually committed early in their pre-teen or early teenage years) to higher level petty crimes and then to far more serious criminal activity.
  + Although this trend is undisputed, other issues are not yet resolved.
    - Studies have not yet determined when police contact or an arrest becomes early onset.
      * Most empirical studies draw the line at age 14, so that any arrest or contact prior to this time is considered early onset.
      * Some experts argue that the line should be drawn earlier (age 12) or even later (age 16).
  + Developmental/life-course perspective has recently become one of the most dominant theories in explaining criminality.
    - A recent study, conducted in 2008, survey 387 criminologists to determine which theories they considered the most viable explanations for explaining serious/persistent criminal behavior.
      * This study found life-course/development theory ranked #2 for most accepted theoretical explanation of serious crime.
* **Antidevelopmental Theory: Low Self-Control Theory**
  + In 1990, Travis Hirschi and Michael Gottfredson proposed a general theory of low self-control as the primary cause of all crime and deviance, often referred to as the general theory of crime.
  + This theory has led to a significant amount of debate and research in the field since its appearance, more than any other contemporary theory of crime.
  + The general theory of crime assumes that self-control must be established by age 10.
    - If it has not formed by that time individuals will forever exhibit low self-control.
  + This assumption of the formation of low self-control by age 10 or before is the oppositional feature of this theory to the developmental perspective.
    - Developmental theory assumes that people can indeed change over time.
  + The general theory assumes that people can take a degree of control over their own decisions and, within certain limitations, control themselves.
  + The general theory of crime is accepted as one of the most valid theories of crime.
    - This is probably due to the parsimony, or simplicity, of the theory because it identifies only one primary factor that causes criminality—low self-control.
  + It is important to note that even this theory has a developmental component in the sense that it proposes that self-control develops during early years from parenting practices; thus, even this most notable antidevelopment theory actually includes a strong developmental aspect.
  + In contrast to Gottfredson and Hirschi’s model, another sound theoretical model shows that individuals can change their life trajectories in terms of crime.
    - Research shows that events or realizations can occur that lead people to alter their frequency or incidence of offending, sometimes to zero.
    - To account for such extreme transitions, we must turn to the dominant life-course model of offending, which is that of Sampson and Laub’s developmental model of offending.
* **Modern Developmental/Life-Course Perspectives**
  + **Sampson and Laub’s Developmental Model**
    - One of the best-known and researched developmental theoretical models to date.
    - Sampson and Laub have proposed a developmental framework that is largely based on a reanalysis of original data collected by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck in the 1940s.
    - As a prototype developmental model, individual stability and change are the primary foci of their theoretical perspective.
    - They emphasized the importance of certain events and life changes, which can alter an individual’s decisions to commit (or not commit) criminal activity.
    - The theory is primarily based on a social control framework, but contains elements of other theoretical perspectives.
      * Early antisocial tendencies among individuals, regardless of social variables, are often linked to later adult criminal offending.
      * Some social structure factors (e.g., family structure and poverty) also tend to lead to problems in social and educational development, which then leads to crime.
      * Another key factor is this development of criminality in the influence of delinquent peers or siblings, which further increases an individual’s likelihood for delinquency.
    - Sampson and Laub also strongly emphasize the importance of **transitions**, or specific events (e.g., marriage and stable employment) that are important in altering long-term trends in behavior, which are referred to as **trajectories**.
      * Such trajectories are more non-specific, longitudinal patterns of behavior either toward or away from committing crime, and are typically the cumulative result of certain or many specific transitions, such as marriage, employment, having children, or military service, which drastically changing a person’s criminal career.
        + There is sound evidence that many individuals who were once on a path toward a consistent form of behavior, in this case, serious, violent crime, suddenly (or gradually) halted due to such a transition or series of transitions.
  + **Moffitt’s Developmental Taxonomy**
    - Proposed by Terrie Moffitt in 1993.
    - Moffitt’s framework distinguishes two types of offenders:
      * Adolescence-limited
        + Make up most of the general public and include all persons who committed offenses when they were teenagers or young adults.
        + Their offending was largely caused by association with peers and a desire to engage in activities that were exhibited by the adults that they are trying to be.
      * Life-course Persistent
        + This small group, estimated to be 4–8% of offenders—albeit the most violent and chronic—commits the vast majority of serious, violent offenses in any society, such as murder, rape, and armed robbery.
        + The disposition of life-course persistent offenders is caused by an interaction between neurological problems and the disadvantaged or criminological environments in which they are raised.
    - Life-course persistent offenders begin offending very early in life and continue to commit crime far into adulthood, even middle age, whereas adolescence-limited offenders tend to engage in criminal activity only during teenage and young adult years.
    - This model suggests that more than one type of development explains criminality.
  + **Thornberry’s Interactional Model of Offending**
    - Presented by Terrence Thornberry in 1987.
    - This model incorporated empirical evidence, which addressed an extremely important aspect that had never been addressed previously in criminological theory.
      * This was the first widely acknowledged model that presented certain factors, such as peer associations, both as a predictor variable but also as a factor that is subsequently influenced by other factors that followed it temporally, such as offending.
        + In other words, negative peer influences predict future offending, but such offending can then cause even more negative peer influence, thus leading to even more criminality.
    - As a basis for his model, Thornberry combined social control and social learning models.
    - Thornberry uniquely claims that the processes of both social control and social learning theory affect each other in a type of feedback process.
    - Thornberry’s interactional model incorporates five primary theoretical constructs, which are synthesized in a comprehensive framework to explain criminal behavior.
      * These five concepts include the following:
        + Commitment to school;
        + Attachment to parents;
        + Belief in conventional values (these first three are taken from social control and bonding theory);
        + Adoption of delinquent values; and
        + Association with delinquent peers (these last two are drawn from social learning and differential-reinforcement theory.
    - These five constructs, which most criminologists would agree are important in the development of criminality, are obviously important in a rational model of crime, so at first, it does not appear that Thornberry has added much to the understanding of criminal behavior.
      * What Thornberry adds beyond other theories is the idea of reciprocity or feedback loops, which no previous theory had mentioned, much less emphasized.
    - Thornberry postulated that engaging in crime leads to hanging out with other delinquents and that hanging out with delinquents leads to committing crimes.
    - Thornberry considers the social control and bonding constructs, such as attachment to parents and commitment to school, which are some of the most essential predictors of delinquency.
      * Like other theoretical models of social bonding and control, Thornberry’s model puts the level of attachments and commitment to conventional society ahead of the degree of moral beliefs that individuals have toward criminal offending.
      * Lack of such moral beliefs leads to delinquent behavior, which in turn negatively affects the level of commitment or attachment an individual, may have built in his or her development.
* **Policy Implications**
  + There are many, perhaps an infinite number of, policy implications that can be derived from developmental theories of criminality.
  + Thus, we will focus on the most important, which is that of prenatal and perinatal stages of life because the most significant and effective interventions can occur during this time.
    - If policy makers hope to reduce early risk factors for criminality, they must insist on universal health care for pregnant women, as well as their newborn infants through the first few years of life.
  + Furthermore, there should be legally mandated interventions for pregnant women who are addicted to drugs or alcohol.
  + The exposure to lead or any other toxins should be monitored, especially in certain areas of cities where such toxins are known to exist.
  + Other policy implications include assigning special caseworkers for high-risk pregnancies.
  + Another advised intervention would be to have a centralized medical system that provides a flag for high-risk infants who have numerous birth or delivery complications, so that the doctors who are seeing them for the first time are aware of their vulnerabilities.
  + Universal preschool should be funded and provided to all young children; studies have shown that this leads to better performance once they enter school, both academically and socially.
* **Conclusions**

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| Theory | Concepts | Proponents | Key Propositions |
| Developmental/Life-Course | Early Onset, Duration, Persistence, Frequency, and Desistence from Crime |  | Focus on following individuals through life. |
|  | Transitions & Trajectories | Sampson & Laub | Individuals can change and stop offending despite early propensities, especially when positive transitions occur (e.g., marriage and employment). |
|  | Life-Course Persistent Offenders & Adolescence-Limited Offenders | Moffitt | There are two primary types of offenders, with the Life-Course type being more chronic offenders that start early and continue throughout life; Adolescent-Limited type only offend during teenage years to early twenties, and then grow out of it. |
|  | Interactions among predictive factors and Reciprocal effects | Thornberry | Key predictive factors have differential effects on certain times in life; these variables tend to influence or interact with each other and cause “feedback loops” or reciprocal effects in which an outcome variable influences a prior antecedent variable, such as when being caught offending causes further tension in parental relationships. |
| Antidevelopmental Theory | Low Self-Control | Hirschi & Gottfredson | Assumption that once low self-control disposition is formed around age 10, no way to change or develop away from criminality. |