

LIFE COURSE CRIME THEORIES AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO THE CRIMINOLOGY FIELD

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Abstract

Early studies revealed that a relatively few “chronic” individuals are responsible for the majority of all reported violent and property offenses. Further research on individual career criminals gave birth to “life course criminology”, which try to explain why certain individuals continue on or desist from deviant behavior. In this context, this study aims to give brief introduction about the life course theories, their presumptions and their enduring value for the field of criminology.

Keywords: Life Course Criminology, Career Criminals, Anti-Social Behavior

Introduction

In the 1970s, the astounding discovery revealed that fewer than 10% of individuals perpetrate more than 50% of crimes (Wolfgang, Figlio, & Sellin, 1972). Farrington and West (1990), using a sample of individuals from great Britain, and Shannon (1982), who conducted a multi-cohort study in Racine, Wisconsin, both found that a relatively few “chronic” individuals were responsible for the majority of all reported violent and property offenses. These findings prompted researchers to investigate individual career criminals (Blumstein & Cohen, 1987). Implicit in the criminal career approach is the presumption that offending behavior by individuals is not static; rather, individuals differ in their participation, initiation, frequency, duration, and seriousness level in offending (Blumstein et al., 1986). Further findings indicated that these differences are important in desisting from and continuing to offending. For instance, individuals begin their offending early in life, known as “age of onset,” are less likely to desist offending until late in life (Loeber 1982; Moffitt 1993; Petersilia 1980). In short, the criminal

career approach has found evidence that those offenders who are likely to be considered “career criminals” are those who engage in crime at a high frequency, who engage in crime over long periods of time, and who commit relatively serious crimes (Blumstein et al., 1988). More importantly, studies revealed that individual differences early in life generally remain stable and continue over the life course (Olweus, 1979; Huesmann et al., 1984).

These findings gave birth to life course criminology, which try to explain developmental trajectories/pathways of individuals over time. Specifically, life course criminology attempts to explore developmental trajectories of career criminals (or antisocial individuals) to figure out how societal changes and short-term developmental transitions affect career criminals’ trajectories (Elder, 1985).

In this context, one of the main concerns of life course perspective is to focus on the degree to which antisocial behavior is stable and the degree to which it is subject to change. Regarding the *stability and change* of antisocial behavior, life course perspective first explains early onset of criminal behavior and then discuss whether the criminal behavior will be continued or discontinued over the life course.

Early Onset

The findings of longitudinal studies reveal that small group of offenders commit majority of crimes over the life course (Wolfgang, Figlio and Sellin, 1972; Moffitt, 2005). Those studies also uncover that those offenders who display behavioral problems early in life are more likely to continue deviant behavior later in life (Fergusson, Horwood and Lynskey, 1995). In this respect, one of the most important contributions of these studies is the identification of early onset behavioral problems for certain individuals. This recognition is important because early appearance in problem behaviors (i.e., impulsiveness, aggression) generally remains stable, and majority of crime is committed by those kids. Therefore, life-course criminology introduces a robust predictor by discovering the strong relationship between early onset of anti-social behavior and crime (Loeber, 1982).

For instance, Loeber and LeBlanck (1990) report that individuals who display early onset of behavioral problems involve in crime at much higher rate than those individuals who do not exhibit the same patterns. Restated differently, the earlier a child shows behavioral problems, the more likely s/he involves in crime. This kind of children also indicates higher rate of frequency in offending (Loeber, 1982).

In this context, Huesmann et al.’s (1984) study is noteworthy to mention. They follow 600 individuals for 22 years from their childhood to adulthood. They notice that a child who exhibits aggressive behaviors at age

8 also displays aggressiveness at age 30. The authors conclude that children who are identified as aggressive by their third grade are more likely to commit more serious crimes compared to their classmates. Blumstein et al. (1986) report similar findings for early onset of problem behavior and crime. Olweus (1979) analyzes 16 studies by using meta-analysis method and finds that there is a strong correlation (.63) between early onset of problem behavior (time 1) and adult criminality (time 2).

Glueck and Glueck's (1950) study also indicates that youths who were arrested later in their adolescent period are more likely to desist from delinquency compared to their counterparts who were arrested much earlier. This finding suggests that there is a positive relationship between early conviction and continuity in crime during adulthood. In addition, Loeber (1982) reports that early onset of delinquency strongly predicts chronic offending. He posits that average stability correlation increases with age. In his study, he concludes that 50-70% of youth who were arrested during childhood continue to commit crime during their adulthood. Moreover, the findings indicated that those individuals are more likely to commit more serious crimes.

Similarly, Cohen (1986) reports that individuals who were arrested before age of 13 involve in crime two or three times higher than those individuals who were arrested later in time. Studies also show that duration of offending is significantly longer for early onset criminals (Leblanc and Frechette, 1989).

Seriousness and frequency of offending is different for early onset and late onset offenders. For instance, Tolan (1987) tests early onset approach by separating individuals as early onset (before age 12) and late onset. His findings suggest that while late onset group (older than 12) engage in minor forms of delinquency, early onset individuals involve in serious offenses 8 times higher than late onset offenders. Similar to Tolan, Frechette and LeBlanc (1979) found that early starters score two and half times higher offending rate than those late starters.

Clinical findings are consistent with the above findings. For instance, Schleifer et al. (1975) studied 3-4 year olds children who were identified as hyperactive in psychiatry clinic. The researchers followed those children up to 6 years old and noticed that hyperactivity is stable across multiple settings for those children who display severe anti-social behavior (hyperactivity). Similarly, Caspi, Avshalom and Terrie (1995) measured temperament level of both boys and girls at ages 3, 5, 7, and 9 years. They found that lack of control is strongly related to later externalizing behavioral problems compared to internalizing problems. On the other hand, they found that sluggishness was weakly associated with both anxiety and inattention,

especially for girls. Their study also reports that both lack of control and sluggishness are negatively associated with adolescent competence.

Taken together, these growing body of research gave birth to developmental or life-course criminology. This approach emphasizes that there is a stability and continuity in human behaviors. For this reason, scholars tend to call individuals, who show problematic behaviors in early age life and continue to more severe waywardness (criminal behavior), as ‘criminal career.’ However, those individuals (criminal careers) differentiate from each other in terms of frequency, seriousness, and length of desistance of offending.

Stability and Continuity

As can be seen, developmental criminology offers two important new concepts, *stability and continuity*, to understand the sources of deviant behavior. Indeed, stability and continuity are interdependent. Stability emphasizes the source of deviant behavior. On the other hand, continuity refers to producing the same behavioral patterns over the life course. In other words, children who display wayward behavior at age 3 (i.e., hitting, pushing) still exhibit similar behavioral patterns during their adulthood. The source of ‘hitting’ trait can be described as *stability* and displaying the same behavior over the life course can be defined as *continuity*. At this point, there are three main theoretical explanations for stability and continuity.

First, Hirschi and Gottfredson (1990) describe people as easy immediate gratification seekers and posit that individuals who have strong internal resistance (self control) are able to ‘not to commit crime.’ The authors explain the source of low self control and its function over the life course. According to them, the quality of self control depends on the quality of parenting during early childhood. In this way, Hirschi and Gottfredson (1990) assert that what has been done early in life of a child determines the level of self control. In other words, they stress that obtained low self control during the early childhood is stable across the life course. According to their notion, a child committing crimes because of having low self control will continue to be a criminal during adolescence and adulthood. In brief, they do not offer a possibility to desist from crime for individuals who have low self control because of poor parenting in early childhood.

Second, by examining the Gluecks’ data, Sampson and Laub (1993) come with a different approach in order to explain crime over the life course in terms of stability and continuity. Recoding and entering the Gluecks data, they figure out that desistance from crime is possible through reestablishing informal social bonds at any point in time over the life course. Similar to Hirschi’s (1969) social bond theory, they posit that delinquency arises when social bonds of individuals are weak or absent. The authors conceptualize

this central premise of social bond theory with “social capital” in order to emphasize the necessity of quality relationships between people not to commit crime. In this way, Sampson and Laub assert that continuity in crime and desistance from delinquency depends on the quality of social capital of individuals. Restating differently, variation in social capital of individuals causes variation in crime. In short, in contrast to Hirschi and Gottfredson (1990), Sampson and Laub (1993) posit that the sources of wayward behavior (stability) can be changed based on recovering quality of social bonds; hence, stability may not produce similar patterns (continuity) over the life course.

The last and third approach comes from Moffitt (1993). She identifies two different types of offenders: (1) adolescent limited and (2) adolescent persistent. Adolescent limited offenders engage in minor forms of delinquency and desist after a short time. On the other hand, adolescent persistent offenders engage in deviant behaviors in early age life and their frequency and severity of delinquency is much higher compared to adolescent limited. For this reason, those individual continue to commit crime during adulthood.

These are the three main theoretical approaches for stability and continuity in the literature. As a result of stability, continuity shows itself in various types depending on both individual and environmental circumstances. These are: (1) cumulative continuity and (2) interactional continuity.

Cumulative Continuity

Cumulative continuity emphasizes that individual behavioral patterns are sustained across the life course in a way of progressive accumulation with its own consequences (Caspi, Elder, and Bern, 1987). One of the most negative consequences of the cumulative continuity is that individuals’ problematic behavioral patterns reduce the chance of staying in conventional mainstream. In brief, cumulative continuity makes snowball effect. It gradually estranges individuals from pro-social behavior and make closer to deviancy. For instance, tantrums are less likely to become successful in school, which in turn affects their occupational status and likelihood of their deviant behaviors (Caspi and Moffitt, 1995).

Sampson and Laub (1993) draw attention to early individual differences in criminal propensities. For instance, they suggest that children having difficult temperament are more likely to confront harsh and erratic discipline. This erratic discipline affects their social capital to their parents, which in turn increases the likelihood of engaging in a delinquent behavior.

As can be seen, early negative individual differences produce unconventional consequences that cumulatively affect individuals' anti-social behavioral patterns.

Interactional Continuity

Caspi and Moffitt (1995) posit that personality and behavior is shaped as a consequence of person and environment interactions. They maintain three types of interactions that result in continuity of personality and environmental interactions across the life course. First, reactive interaction that emphasizes unique environment, but different interpretation, reaction and experience of individuals. Second, evocative interaction that happens when an individual's personality evokes distinctive responses. Third, proactive interaction implies that individuals select or create their own environments.

Reactive interaction can be exemplified with siblings that share different behavioral patterns within the same family. It is expected that aggressive siblings negatively react to parental discipline, since they see the world from a different perspective. This reactive aggression progressively becomes their nature, and they internalize aggressiveness (Caspi and Moffitt, 1995).

One of the other outcomes of early onset behavioral problems is evocative reactions. As noted above, aggressive children provoke angry reactions of their parents, teachers, and their immediate environments. This evocative continuity reduces the chance of pro-social behaviors of those individuals, which indirectly drive them to the edge of delinquency.

The last one is proactive reaction that operates through self-selection of individuals. Caspi and Moffitt (1995) define proactive reaction simply as selective process and interpretation. Indeed, everyone makes self-selection and interprets the life. However, people generally make their self-selection based on their own characteristics. In this respect, it is expected that aggressive children select aggressive peers, which in turn increase their wayward behaviors due to the negative socialization and interaction (Patterson and Band, 1990).

The importance of cumulative and interactional continuity

Caspi et al. (1987) and Caspi and Moffitt (1995) stress that continuity in non-confirmative behaviors can be best understood by tracing various interaction types over the life course. This approach is important in terms of intervention strategies for the sources of cumulative continuity. As noted, cumulative continuity stems from specific or stable behavioral patterns that embedded in individuals. However, one of the reasons of cumulative

continuity is environmental interactions. For instance, erratic reinforcement strategies of parents may exacerbate the situation (Caspi et al., 1989).

In this context, Elder and Caspi (1988) note that cumulative and interactional continuity are the key issues that sustain behavioral problems over the life course. It can be said that interactional continuity gives generally negative feedback to those individuals who are identified as early onset of behavioral problems. Therefore, interactional continuity plays an important role in cumulative continuity over the life course (Patterson, 1988).

Empirical realm of these approaches also confirms the importance of cumulative and interactional continuity. For instance, Caspi et al. (1989) analyze Institute of Human Development' data that consists of over two hundred men and women. Cases were traced from their birth (1928) to adulthood. The authors employ ill-temperedness, shyness, and dependence as independent variables in order to measure how these variables affect individual performance over the life course. The results suggest two main conclusions: (1) Childhood interaction styles differ for men and women. (2) Employed independent variables negatively affect individual performance (i.e. occupational instability); but do not evenly operate on individuals. The findings are consistent with the predictions. Ill-temperedness show similar patterns (cumulative continuity) over the life course and indirectly affects personal performance through school failure and lower occupational status.

Caspi et al. (1987) analyze Berkeley Guidance Study that enables researchers to trace both tantrum men and women for 30 years over the life course. The results are evident that tantrum men and women marry with individuals who share similar characteristics with them (i.e., tantrums, ill-tempered). These individuals' occupational status generally is low, and their divorce rate is high as well. In addition, tantrum women tended to become ill-tempered mothers in their forthcoming life.

Similarly, Caspi's (2000) longitudinal study indicates that personality structure and early individual differences cumulatively and interactively continue over the life course. These traits (i.e., impulsivity) are more likely to drive individuals into delinquency. On the other hand, Horney, Osgood, and Marshall (1995) posit that changing in local-life circumstances also corresponds changing in involvement in crime. Their findings indicate that cumulative continuity is to some extent related to environmental interaction.

Conclusion and Implications of developmental studies

Developmental theories offer enormous policy implications for crime reduction. First, stability nature of behaviors gives an opportunity to identify which individuals have more tendencies to deviant behavior. Second, empirical studies suggest that continuity, which stems from stability of the

behaviors, is highly predictable (Fergusson et al., 1995). Therefore, tracking high risk groups to some extent ensures scholars to control disruptive children's behaviors.

Third, cumulative continuity and interactional continuity help us to understand how individuals' behaviors evolve and change (in both directions: negative – positive) over the life course. Since one part of the cumulative continuity derives from interactional continuity, immediate environment (i.e., parents, teachers, peers) can be enforced in a positive way to shape/truncate behavioral problems.

In conclusion, developmental theories bring biology, psychology, and socio-psychology into criminology in order to explain the sources of deviant behavior more elaborately. Since crime is not random and committed by small amount of people and those people have generally disruptive behaviors from early childhood, life-course theories offer proactive approach for crime and criminals.

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