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The Criminal Career Paradigm and Its Relevance to Studying Sex Offenders

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Introduction

In the early 1980s the U.S. crime rate was on the rise, the nation's prison population experienced an unprecedented growth – over 200% over a period of only 10 years – and crime control policies were largely perceived to be ineffective. Against this background, the National Institute of Justice, via the National Academy of Sciences, organized the Panel on Research on Criminal Careers that was asked to review extant scientific knowledge on criminal careers and to explore alternatives to mass incarceration as the conventional – but increasingly costly – way of crime control. Informed by the findings from the Philadelphia birth cohort study (Wolfgang, Figlio, & Sellin, 1972), which showed that a relatively small portion of the cohort members was responsible for a disproportionate share of all serious crime in this cohort, and the results from interviews with imprisoned offenders conducted by the Rand Corporation (Peterson & Braiker, 1980; Chaiken & Chaiken, 1982) showing considerable variety in the frequency of offending reported by these inmates, the Panel's attention was drawn to ways of distinguishing the most persistent, most frequent, and most serious offenders and the potential benefits of selectively incarcerating these "career criminals."

To accomplish their mission the Panel devised a novel way of organizing knowledge on key aspects of individual offending patterns that was motivated by its theoretical stance that different causal processes drive development in these different dimensions (Blumstein, Cohen, Roth, & Visher, 1986). By doing so, the Panel's report laid the fundaments of the criminal career approach to studying crime and

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deviance, providing criminologists not only with a new set of empirical and theoretical challenges, but also with a shared vocabulary in which to address these issues. Since its publication a vast amount of empirical, theoretical, and policy-orientated research has been published making use of the tools laid out in the Panel's report, greatly increasing our knowledge on the longitudinal patterning of offending, the factors contributing to this development, and the ways in which formal interventions may impact the course of criminal careers (Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2003).

In many ways, the current situation with regard to sexual offending is similar to that leading to the commissioning of the Panel's report. Public outrage and fear concerning sexual offenders in the United States and elsewhere is unprecedentedly high (Quinn, Forsyth, & Mullen-Quinn, 2004). Policies aimed at sexual offenders, as well as the number of individuals subjected to these policies, are rapidly increasing and with them public expenditures to monitor and enforce sex offenders' compliance to these policies are skyrocketing (Zimring, 2004). In part this is due to the fact that policymakers, as do the general public, tend to treat all sex offenders alike and view them as highly repetitive, extremely dangerous, and incorrigible offenders – the worst of the worst – this in spite of the fact that available empirical evidence consistently points to considerable variety in sex offenders' criminal behavior (Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007). Furthermore, as with sex offenders, sex crimes also vary greatly along various dimensions, including seriousness (degree of violence) and sexual intrusiveness (nature of sexual behavior). The most serious forms of sexual offenses are among the most hideous violations of individual rights, and utmost efforts should be made to prevent harm to future victims. This is precisely why these efforts should be guided, not by moral panic but by detailed knowledge of the way criminal careers of sexual offenders develop over time. Breaking up sex offenders' criminal careers into different dimensions and gaining insight into the causal processes that underlie these dimensions will allow us to develop strategies to deal with sexual offending more effectively and more efficiently.

The current volume champions a criminal career approach to studying sexual offending. Its central aim is to bridge the criminal career literature and the sex offender literature that thus far have developed largely separately. These scientific literatures have emerged from two relatively distinct research traditions, theoretical perspectives, and methodological traditions. For example, coming from a clinical perspective, the field of sexual offending has described and detailed underlying motivations and associated cognitive processes of sex offenders. Sociologically orientated criminologists studying criminal development, on the other hand, have applied sophisticated statistical techniques to large data sets in efforts to establish which outside factors causally impact the course of criminal careers. We believe these fields of research can benefit from each other in various ways. Bringing these two fields of research together is beneficial to researchers in the sexual offending field as the criminal career literature provides them with a set of tools currently underutilized in studies on sexual offending. Applying these tools will yield insight into the way sexual offending develops over the individual's life span, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Taking a criminal career perspective will also shed light on

the way patterns of sexual offending interrelate with developmental patterns in other types of crime and deviance. Further, applying the criminal career approach to sexual offending will inform both treatment and policy as it yields valuable information on the behavioral antecedents of sexual (re)offending, as well as the way sexual offending is most likely to progress if left unaddressed. In turn, the study of sex offenders' criminal careers advances the criminal career literature by providing insight into the extent to which conclusions based on current criminal career research also apply to this specific subgroup of offenders. In consequence, studying the criminal development of sex offenders speaks on the generalizability of the theoretical explanations that are being offered to understand the development of crime over the life course.

The current chapter will lay the foundations for the subsequent chapters in the volume by providing a definition of the criminal career and explicating the various criminal career dimensions. The chapter continues with a brief synopsis of the current knowledge base on criminal career development of general, nonsexual offenders and an overview of the currently dominant theoretical perspectives on criminal career development. Against the background of these empirical results, possibilities and pitfalls for policy and interventions are discussed. The latter part of this chapter will apply the criminal career approach to sexual offending, sketching its applications and potential ramifications for the study, prevention, and treatment of sexual offending over the life span.

What Is a Criminal Career?

The Panel defined the criminal career as the longitudinal sequence of crimes committed by an individual offender (Blumstein et al., 1986). By no means does the term "career" imply that offenders derive their livelihood from offending, that offenders are or aim to become professionals of sex offending, or that they commit a certain number of offenses. The career concept is merely proposed to systematically structure the chain of criminal behaviors associated with an individual. In the criminological literature criminal careers are sometimes also referred to as developmental pathways or criminal trajectories (Loeber & Leblanc, 1990; Leblanc & Loeber, 1998). The Panel distinguished four key dimensions that characterize criminal careers:

1 Participation – the distinction between those who engage in crime and those who do not
2 Frequency – the rate of criminal activity of those who are active
3 Seriousness of offenses committed, or crime mix
4 Career length – the length of time an offender is active.

Participation refers to the portion of a population that engages in crime. Participation depends on the scope of the criminal acts considered and the length of the

observational period, and is conditional on factors such as sex and age. Age of onset is used to refer to the age of first participation in crime.

Frequency refers to the number of offenses per year per active offender. Frequency, which is often denoted by the Greek letter lambda (λ), varies between individuals, as well as for individuals over time, as in the course of their criminal career offenders go through periods in which they accelerate or decelerate their offending.

Seriousness deals with the kinds of crimes committed and is also referred to as crime mix. As with frequency, offenders may differ in the kinds of crimes they commit, with one offender committing more serious crimes than another. Again, as with offending frequency, criminal careers may be characterized by (periods of) increasing seriousness – escalation – or by (periods of) decreasing seriousness – de-escalation. In addition, if offenders commit many different types of crimes they are commonly referred to as generalists; if, on the other hand, their criminal behavior is more limited in scope and they engage in only one or a group of closely related offenses, they are said to be specialists. Adding a time dimension to this distinction, criminal careers may be characterized by (periods of) generalization or diversification in which offenders engage in increasingly different types of crime, or by (periods of) specialization in which one offense increasingly dominates the offending pattern.

Career length or duration refers to the time period between the first and the last offense. Like participation, career length depends heavily on the length of the observational period. Ideally, to determine the criminal career duration of an individual offender, this offender would have to be followed up from birth to death. In practice, however, observational periods are more limited than that and often data are right censored – the observational period ending before the death of the offender – which introduces uncertainty as to whether offending was actually terminated after the last offense observed. Residual career length refers to the number of future years that a currently active offender is expected to remain criminally active.

While seemingly clear cut, these dimensions are complexly linked, and when thinking about (or researching) criminal careers it is always important to be mindful of these complexities. A notorious example is the age/crime curve (Farrington, 1986). If, for a particular cohort, one were to plot the total number of offenses per age, a curve steeply accelerating to a peak around the end of adolescence, followed by a more gradual decline during adulthood, would be most likely to emerge. However, from this graph it would remain unclear to what extent the observed peak in offending was caused by increasing numbers of adolescents becoming criminally active – increased participation – and to what extent the group of already active criminals had increased their frequency of offending during this period. Similarly, specialization could result from an offender increasing his offending frequency for a particular offense type or from him ending his committing other offense types, or both. Even career length can be disputable: many offenders have criminal careers that are characterized be extensive periods of nonoffending or intermittency (Piquero, 2004); how long can a period of intermittency be for the offender to still be referred to as criminally active? And, provided the intermittent period is long enough, can a person be considered to be engaging in two criminal careers in

different periods of his or her life? By itself the career approach does not provide answers to these questions as they link directly to theory. What the career approach does do is provide the language to address these issues and with it the opportunity to increase the explanatory value of our theories.

Studying Criminal Careers

The Current Knowledge Base on Criminal Careers

In his 2002 Sutherland address before the American Society of Criminology, David Farrington reviewed the current empirical knowledge base on criminal careers (Farrington, 2003). He summarized his findings in what he deemed 10 accepted conclusions on the development of criminal behavior over the life course.

First, the prevalence in offending reaches its zenith in the late teenage years; more young people than adults engage in crime (e.g., Stattin, Magnusson, & Reichel, 1989; Farrington, 1986).

Second, the onset of offending usually occurs in late childhood or early adolescence, while most offenders terminate their criminal careers somewhere during the third decade of life (Farrington, 1992).

Third, there is continuity of offending over the life course, meaning that those individuals who commit many offenses during one age period are at increased risk of committing offenses during the next (Tracy & Kempf-Leonard, 1996). This continuity is thought to primarily reflect stable individual differences, though dynamic processes may also lead to stability in behavior (Sampson & Laub, 1997). Continuity does not preclude within-individual development as offenders' criminal careers may show signs of acceleration or escalation, or changes in the mix of crimes that are committed.

Fourth, onset, frequency, and duration are linked such that an early onset predicts a relatively long criminal career duration and a relatively high offending frequency (Farrington, Lambert, & West, 1998). This does not necessarily mean that those with an early onset show a continuously high rate of offending across their entire criminal career (Piquero, 2007). It does mean that compared to those starting their criminal career at later ages, early onset offenders tend to have a higher offending frequency and a more prolonged criminal career.

This links to the fifth conclusion, which was already the focus of the Panel on Criminal Careers, that a relatively small group of offenders – namely those showing an early onset, high offending frequency, and prolonged criminal career duration – are responsible for a disproportionate share of all crime (Wolfgang et al., 1972). The extent of this overrepresentation depends on the time scale across which it is calculated and increases with the period under scrutiny (Blokland & Nieuwbeerta, 2007).

Sixth, offenders tend to show a very diverse set of offenses. While there is some evidence of specialization, either measured from one offense to the next (Paternoster, Brame, Piquero, Mazerolle, & Dean, 1998), or with age across the entire criminal career (Nieuwbeerta, Blokland, Piquero, & Sweeten, 2011), it always occurs against the background of much versatility in offending.

Seventh, notwithstanding versatility in offending, some offenses tend to be committed before others, and some types of offenses are more common in certain age groups compared to others (Leblanc & Fréchette, 1989).

Eight, versatility extends beyond judicial boundaries and offending is usually part of a larger, much broader behavioral repertoire consisting of potentially harmful behaviors like substance use, reckless driving, and unsafe sex (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990).

Ninth, with increasing age, offending changes from being a group activity to being a solo activity. During the teenage years offenses are usually committed with co-offenders, while during the adult years offenses are most times committed alone (McCord & Conway, 2002). This change does not stem from group-offenders terminating their criminal careers earlier, or solo-offenders showing a late onset of offending, rather individual offenders tend to shift from group- to solo-offending as they age.

Tenth, motivations for offending, in contrast to offending itself, do tend to become less diverse with age. While teenagers may attest to committing crimes out of boredom and need for excitement, or because of compelling emotional states, adults usually report more utilitarian motives (Leblanc, 1996).

While based upon a vast number of empirical studies, Farrington hastens to add that the generalization of these conclusions might be compromised by the relative lack of empirical research among samples other than white, lower-class, Anglo-Saxon boys and the fact that the available studies pertain mostly to run-of-the-mill street-crime type of offenses. Available research among women and organized crime offenders, for example, shows that these conclusions might not readily apply to these groups (Block, Blokland, Van der Werff, Van Os, & Nieuwbeerta, 2010; Van Koppen, De Poot, & Blokland, 2010).

Furthermore, Farrington's conclusions were based on observations and empirical findings from longitudinal research conducted with different cohorts of individuals followed over long periods of time and describing criminal careers in general offending, taking offenders' whole criminal activity into account. Whereas research on sexual offenders is typically based on individuals convicted for their crime and recruited to participate in research studies while they are in prison or taking part in a treatment program, criminal career research has typically been based on general samples of youth recruited in schools, at-risk neighborhoods, and so on, often before their first police contact or first conviction. While research with sex offenders is often based on retrospective data, criminal career research usually relies on prospective longitudinal data. The two methodological approaches espoused in the different fields of study can yield very different pictures of the same phenomenon. For

example, research has shown that retrospective data, as opposed to prospective data, tend largely to overestimate persistence in offending. The lack of empirical research into the criminal careers of different subgroups of offenders thus far not only limits the ability to draw definitive conclusions about the development of criminal careers, but has also influenced the theoretical explanations that have been offered to account for these developments.

Explaining Empirical Findings on Criminal Careers

While itself rather devoid of theory, the criminal career approach has fueled many recent theoretical debates about the best way to conceptualize criminal development.

From the start, the criminal-career approach's basic theoretical stance – namely that, in principle, different causal mechanisms could govern each criminal career dimension (Blumstein, Cohen, & Farrington, 1988) – has been disputed. Flag bearers of the opposition to distinguishing criminal career dimensions have been Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi, whose critique of the criminal career approach culminated into the development of their General Theory of crime (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). These authors question the need for distinguishing criminal career dimensions by stating that these dimensions are all intrinsically linked in such a way that rank ordering offenders on these different dimensions will produce the same outcome across each dimension (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1987). That is, those who begin participating in crime the earliest will also tend to be the most frequent and most persistent offenders, and, merely due to their total number of offenses, will show the largest variety in terms of crime mix. According to Gottfredson and Hirschi, the risk factors for participation are therefore similar to those predicting frequency or career length. They go on to argue that offending develops similarly across age for all offenders (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). They underpin their argument by showing that the age distribution of offenders is similarly shaped across geographical places and historical periods. Given that, to these authors, participation and frequency amount to the same thing, they argue that individual offending patterns show the same rise and decline with age as does the aggregate curve for all offenders. They propose a maturational take on desistance from crime, and argue that no variable other than age itself has been offered that can explain the decline in offending across the individual's life span.

Various authors have taken issue with Gottfredson and Hirschi's maturational stance, including Hirschi's former students Robert Sampson and John Laub. These criminologists proffer a less deterministic view of development, stating that human behavioral development is not to be interpreted as the unfolding of something that is already latently present in the individual, but rather as a dynamic process characterized by plasticity and receptivity to random outside influence (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Laub & Sampson, 2003).

Building on insights from social control theory, Sampson and Laub argue that changes in criminal behavior over the life course can be understood as resulting

from changes in the level of social control that individuals experience (Sampson & Laub, 1990). During times in which social control is low, criminal behavior is more likely. Important life events and transitions in conventional life-course domains, such as school, work, and personal relationships, often are accompanied by changes in the level of control one experiences, therefore allowing these transitions to be potential turning points in the individual's criminal career. While decreasing levels of social control during adolescence are argued to explain the observed peak in offending during this period, increasing levels of social control resulting from individuals engaging progressively more in conventional adult social roles – for example, employee, husband, father – in turn are argued to underlie the decrease in offending during the adult period (Laub & Sampson, 2001). Unlike Gottfredson and Hirschi, who argue that the observed association between certain life circumstances and crime is spurious and merely based on some underlying variable making people both more likely to experience certain transitions and more likely to refrain from crime (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1995), Sampson and Laub thus ascribe causal power to such transitions in rerouting individual criminal careers (Sampson & Laub, 1995).

Transitions, however, do not only explain change in criminal behavior, they can also explain continuity. While cognizant of the fact that stable individual differences may contribute to the observed stability of crime over the life course, Sampson and Laub argue that continuity can also result from the same dynamic processes that bring about change in offending (Sampson & Laub, 1997). To explain continuity or escalation of crime over the life course, these authors refer to the process known as cumulative disadvantage. While transitions in other life-course domains influence the likelihood of criminal behavior, criminal behavior itself may also impact development in these conventional domains. A conviction may lead an offender to experience a divorce or cause him or her to get fired. Similarly, a "bad reputation" may alter the offender's chances in the marriage market in much the same way that a criminal record complicates his or her transition into the labor market. In turn, the severance or continued absence of these social bonds makes future criminal behavior even more likely, giving rise to a perpetual process of accumulating risks and, in the end, continuity in deviant behavior.

While at odds with each other on the nature of the causal processes that govern criminal development, the above theories do agree that one theory is sufficient to explain criminal behavior in all offenders. That is, both maturational theories and dynamic theories are general theories as they assume that the behavior of all offenders is the product of the same causal forces. Typological theories, on the other hand, paint a more complex picture and seek to identify special subgroups of offenders whose criminal behavior is argued to be explained by different causal factors (Paternoster, Dean, Piquero, Mazerolle, & Brame, 1997).

One of the most popular typological theories in developmental criminology is the dual taxonomy put forth by Terrie Moffitt. Based on her research on the Dunedin cohort, she proposed that there are at least two types of offenders (Moffitt, 1993). The large majority of offenders become criminally active only during adolescence and have criminal careers of relatively short duration. A small minority, however,

exhibits an early onset of problematic and antisocial behavior during childhood, and a continued pattern of crime and deviance far into adulthood. Together, according to Moffitt, these two groups can explain the shape of the age-crime curve, with the many adolescents participating in crime explaining the peak during the teenage years, and those starting early and persisting in crime causing the age-crime curve to flare at both the youngest and older ages (Moffitt, 1993; Moffitt, 2006).

Besides distinguishing these two different types of offenders based on their criminal career features, the dual taxonomy also offers different explanations for the criminal development of these two groups (Moffitt, 1997). According to Moffitt, those criminally active mainly during adolescence – the adolescence-limited type – commit crimes primarily as a way to express their need for personal autonomy. As in modern day Western society social maturity lags behind physical maturity, delinquency in this group is best seen as a temporal surrogate for achieving adult status, which is easily abandoned when, with age, conventional opportunities start to present themselves. For those with criminal careers showing an early onset, high frequency of offending, and a prolonged duration, however, the root cause of their problematic behavior is said to lie in neuropsychological deficits taxing early parent-child interactions. As these children are progressively deprived of opportunities to learn and practice prosocial behavior, their problematic behavior quickly escalates to delinquency and crime as they reach school-going age. As antisocial behavior increasingly becomes ingrained in the behavioral repertoire of these youths, by the time conventional opportunities start to present themselves, these children are both less equipped and less able to seize these opportunities and materialize these transitions into turning points in their criminal development (Moffitt, 1994).

Criminal Career Dimensions and Strategies for Crime Control

From the criminal career approach three general orientations to crime control follow: prevention, career modification, and incapacitation (Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2003). Prevention policies aim at inhibiting participation and diminishing the number of nonoffenders becoming offenders. Career modification strategies, on the other hand, focus on already active offenders and aim to achieve changes in different career dimensions that are associated with reducing the costs of crime. Career modification strategies can, for example, target offending frequency or career duration, but can also focus on preventing novice offenders from developing toward committing more serious offenses. Finally, incapacitation seeks to reduce the number of offenses committed by an offender by effectively taking out a slice of his criminal career.

To illustrate the usefulness of the career approach with regard to policy issues, let us consider, as did the Panel (Blumstein et al., 1986), selective incapacitation. General or collective incapacitation strategies aim at reducing crime by increasing the total level of incarceration, either by increasing the number of offenders

sentenced to incarceration, or by increasing the length of the average incarceration period (Spelman, 2000). General incapacitation strategies are largely insensitive to the fact that the frequency of offending among active criminals is most times heavily skewed with relatively few very active offenders accounting for a disproportionate share of the total number of crimes committed. Selective incapacitation policies, on the other hand, try to selectively target this group of frequent offenders in an effort to achieve the greatest possible crime reduction for the lowest possible costs (Stemen, 2007). Offending frequency is the criminal career dimension of essence in deciding which offenders to target, and the degree to which the benefits of selective incapacitation can be realized depends heavily on the ability to identify frequent offenders ahead of time and not only in hindsight.

Assuming stability in offending frequency over the course of the criminal career, the selection criterion for selective policies is usually based on the total number of crimes committed or the rate of offending offenders have evidenced in the recent past. The benefits of selective incapacitation – the number of crimes prevented by incarcerating that particular offender – are usually estimated by extrapolating the offender's criminal history into the period of incarceration (Spelman, 1994). However, to the extent that offending frequency is more erratic and that criminal careers are riddled with periods of intermittency, the benefits of selective incapacitation based on the stability thesis may be overestimated.

Furthermore, once certain offenders have been identified as targets of selective policies, knowledge of their criminal career duration is necessary to determine the length of the incapacitation period. If too short, selectively incarcerated offenders might resume their criminal career upon release. If too long, offenders might end up being incarcerated in years in which they, if out on the street, would not have committed any new offenses, greatly reducing the efficiency of the selective policy. Finally, levels of specialization among the selectively targeted group will influence the outcome of selective incapacitation in terms of the types of crimes for which rates are most likely to be reduced (Blokland & Nieuwbeerta, 2007).

Despite the Panel's focus on incapacitation, the criminal career approach, given that it is largely devoid of theory, does not beforehand favor one crime control strategy over the other. In fact, many criminal-career researchers have been very critical toward selective incapacitation. Insights gained from systematically studying the different criminal career dimensions can, however, equally benefit prevention and career modification strategies. In fact, there is no watershed between these strategies as most crime control efforts combine elements from these different general strategies. Increased periods of incarceration can, for instance, also be used to actively modify the criminal careers of those selectively incapacitated by, for example, providing treatment or vocational training. In sum, policy decisions on whom to target, when to target them, and for how long to target them, as well as estimates of the potential benefits of these policies, may be greatly improved by considering different criminal career dimensions.

Applying the Criminal Career Approach to Sex Offending

Career Dimensions in Sexual Offenders' Criminal Careers

Ever since the heydays of the Chicago school, sociological explanations of crime have occupied mainstream criminologists. While biological and psychological explanations have never been completely abandoned, in most current biological or psychological theories crime and delinquency are not considered "pathological" in the strict sense of the word. At least three factors have contributed to the popularity of sociological explanations of general crime. First, the sheer commonality of rule breaking makes it hard to maintain that crime and delinquency result from individual pathology. In fact, self-report studies have shown that among adolescents, delinquency is the norm rather than the exception (Elliott, Ageton, Huizinga, Knowles, & Canter, 1983). Second, it has long been recognized that crime is unequally distributed across age, with delinquency being most common among the young (Farrington, 1986). Again, if large numbers of young people who engage in delinquency and crime grow up to be law-abiding adults, theoretical explanations referring to individual pathology become harder to reconcile with the empirics of crime. Third, many forms of crime and delinquency, while perhaps conceived as morally wrong at some level, do not have serious consequences, which, together with crime being common, tends to limit the psychological distance between "them," the wrongdoers, and "us," the conformists. More so than sociological theories, biological and psychological theories allow us to consider criminals as different from ourselves. In proffering sociological explanations, criminologists have made it easier to conceive of crime as resulting from circumstances in which, even if only in theory, we could imagine ourselves being. Finally, policymakers see themselves confronted with questions on how to deal with large groups of offenders and even larger groups of potential offenders. Therefore they tend to focus on changing structural variables that apply to many people at once, rather than on individual risk factors. Consequently, many criminological theories focus on the convergence of contextual factors that produces criminal behavior, but often remain opaque on the precise individual mechanisms that translate these broader contextual factors into individual behavior.

More so than mainstream criminology, the sex offender literature has remained close to its biological and psychological roots. While plagued by – possibly huge – dark figures in official registrations (Ahlmeyer, Heil, McKee, & English, 2000; Marshall & Barbaree, 1990), sexual transgressions are still relatively uncommon compared to other types of crime. Furthermore, the severity of many sex offenses and the moral outrage that follows make it harder to identify with the perpetrator, resulting in explanations for sexual offending in terms of individual pathology being more easily accepted. (Quinn, Forsyth, & Mullen-Quinn, 2004). Lastly, clinicians assigned to treat sex offenders need to make one-on-one decisions based on detailed personal information on the perpetrator involved, rather than devise a more general policy. As a result, the most common explanations for sexual offending have focused

on individual pathologies and early trauma. While sociological criminology has been criticized for neglecting the individual-level mechanisms via which sociological variables influence behavior, sex offender researchers can be said to have focused on individual factors at the cost of a broader view of sexual offending. The field of sexual offending has typically promoted theoretical views describing sex offending as the result of trait-like features (e.g., cognitive distortions, low victim empathy, deviant sexual preferences, poor attachment style, sexual regulation) that are not well suited for a longitudinal perspective aiming to describe and explain the development of sexual offending (e.g., Lussier & Healy, 2009). This raises questions such as: if cognitive distortions are responsible for the onset and persistence of sex offending, how can we explain desistance from sex offending? If low victim empathy is a precursor to sex offending, how can we explain that for some persistent offenders, offending will escalate in seriousness over time, but for others, it won't? The trait-like approach has limitations when one espouses a longitudinal perspective such as the criminal career approach.

These different frames of reference have also contributed to sex offender researchers emphasizing the differences, rather than searching for the commonalities between sexual and nonsexual offending. The study of participation in sex crimes, and the risk factors associated with it, has been largely independent of that of participation in nonsexual crimes. A telling example in this regard is the only "recent" discovery of juvenile sex offenders as a separate population of interest (Van Wijk, Van Horn, Bullens, Bijleveld, & Doreleijers, 2005). Beforehand, explanations of adult sex offending were deemed appropriate for juveniles under the implicit assumption that juvenile sex offenders would eventually grow up to become adult sex offenders; this despite juvenile delinquency being high on the research agenda of criminologists from the very start and in the face of evidence from mainstream criminology that most juvenile delinquents do not become adult criminals (Farrington, 2003). Recognizing that the causal processes that bring juvenile sex offenders to committing their crimes might be age graded and that desistance from sex offending with age is widespread, has opened the door to developmental theories explaining sexual offending that focus on context of adolescence and that allow for developmental trajectories other than the one going from bad to worse.

When considering the criminal careers of sexual offenders, every career feature gets an extra dimension. As recognized by Soothill and colleagues (Soothill, Francis, Sanderson, & Ackerley, 2000), for example, the question of whether offenders are general or specialized in their offending is more complicated if one considers sexual offenses to be a distinct group of offenses. Sex offenders can be either specialized or diverse in their offending in terms of their committing solely sex offenses or a mix of sexual and nonsexual offenses. However, sex offenders can also be specialized in the sense that they only commit one or a group of closely related sex offenses, for example, in terms of whether the offenses involve physical contact or not or in terms of the age or sex of the victims involved. This observation allows for the possibility that sex offenders are generalists in one sense and specialists in the other.

Linked to questions regarding specialization is the issue of escalation: do sexual offending careers tend to follow a "stepping stone" type of development in the sense that sexual offending starts with relatively minor hands-off transgressions and over the course of the offender's career escalates to more severe hands-on offenses with increasing levels of violence? Or do, for example, hands-off offenders rarely cross over to commit hands-on offenses? Again, as with specialization, the question of escalation may also pertain to general offending escalating from minor nonsexual offenses to more severe violent offenses, to severe forms of sexual violence.

These observations have clear theoretical and practical ramifications. If sex offenders are generalists in the sense that they tend to commit both sexual and nonsexual offenses, then the question becomes whether these two types of offending share a common cause, or whether they merely coincide. If sexual offending and nonsexual offending share a common cause, theories explaining sexual offending by referring to derailed sexual development seem to fall short of providing a satisfactory answer. For the therapist working in sex offender treatment programs, the need to consider the sex offender's whole criminal activity might be a futile exercise given that the goal of treatment is to prevent a sexual reoffense. However, if a sex crime is part of a versatile criminal trajectory, the exclusive focus of treatment on factors that are said to be specific to sex offending, as opposed to criminogenic needs that are causing the individual's offending, will not decrease the risk of sex offending. The same argument has been raised for risk assessment and the prediction of recidivism with sex offenders (Lussier & Cortoni, 2008).

However, if sex offenders are generalists in that they commit both sexual and nonsexual crimes, but are nevertheless specialists in terms of their sexual offending, theories that treat sexual offending like any other type of offending might need to be reconsidered to the extent that sexual preoccupations and not merely opportunity factors are at play. Furthermore, if some sexual offending careers tend to escalate, the question becomes whether we are able to predict with an acceptable degree of certainty in which cases this is most likely to happen. While in terms of prevention, much could be learned by studying those that refrain from taking their offending to the next level.

Finally, while a sizable literature addresses the influence of delinquent peers and co-offending among juvenile offenders, for a long time reports of group sex offenses have been limited to the popular media. Recent research, however, shows that group sex offending might be more common than was once believed (Bijleveld, Weerman, Looije, & Hendriks, 2007). To what extent explanations of co-offending derived from mainstream criminology also apply to group sex offending still requires further investigation.

To What Extent Can Life-Course Theories Explain Sex Offenders' Careers?

A contentious issue in life-course criminology is the question of to what extent between-individual differences in criminal careers result from pre-existing individual differences in terms of stable risk factors together constituting the individual's

criminal propensity, and to what extent endogenous factors and important life-course transitions exert an independent influence on the individual's criminal trajectory (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1995; Sampson & Laub, 1995). If the criminal careers of sexual offenders are best understood in terms of stable between-individual differences, this would speak directly to the relevance of the criminal career approach to studying sexual offending – which in that case would be limited. In fact, given that according to maturational theories crime develops similarly for all individuals, sex offending trajectories are expected to follow the general age-crime curve much like any other type of offense. Based on dynamic theories, however, variance in sexual offending trajectories is expected, with some offenders showing developmental patterns that contradict the aggregate age-crime curve. In as far as dynamic explanations apply to sexual offending, both change and continuity in sex offending over time may result from dynamic processes, which are open to outside influence. Combined with the criminal career notion that the causal mechanisms governing each career dimension might differ, dynamic theories urge researchers to study career dimensions of sexual offenders both separately and in tandem and to come up with explanations for not only participation in sex offending, but also the acceleration, escalation, and cessation of sex offending over the individual's life course.

Maturational and dynamic theories both assume that the same mechanism – or mechanisms – underlie the behavior of all offenders. In life-course criminology the distinction between general and typological theories refers to the need to entertain different etiological theories for explaining criminal careers that show distinct features, like an early onset, a high offending frequency, and a long duration (Paternoster et al., 1997). When applied to sexual offending, however, the general/typological distinction can apply to many more plausible divisions between criminal careers, rapidly complicating the theoretical picture.

The most important theoretical question that needs to be answered is whether sex offenders should be regarded as similar or different from nonsexual offenders in terms of the etiology of their offending behavior. If sexual offending is different from nonsexual offending, different theories emphasizing different causal mechanisms might be needed to explain the development of each. Conceptually, development in each trajectory should than be studied separately, each with its own risk factors, while, to the extent development in sexual offending is considered dynamic, allowing transitions in each trajectory to influence development in the other. If, on the other hand, sexual offending is considered as an integral part of a general offending repertoire, than sexual and nonsexual offending are expected to have similar risk factors, and questions of, for example, specialization and escalation of offending would include sex offending together with nonsex offending in the same metric. To complicate things further, one could even ask whether different types of sexual offenses should be considered as stemming from different causal processes and thus best be considered as constituting different developmental pathways. Again this would call for conceptualizing development – participation, frequency, duration – in each of these offense types separately while again allowing interdependence between developments in these different trajectories. In terms of career features, the

question of whether different offender types exist could be asked for sexual and for nonsexual offenses separately, or for both combined. In case of the former, researchers might seek to distinguish adolescence-limited from persistent sex offenders, while in the latter the question would be to what extent sexual offending (or which type of sexual offending) is characteristic of a certain overall offending trajectory.

How Can the Criminal Career Approach Inform Policy Decisions Regarding Sex Offenders?

Current policy decisions have been focused on one dimension of the criminal career, that is, persistence. Recent legal and penal dispositions have all pursued the same goal of reducing the risk of sexual reoffending, whether through rehabilitation, deterrent, or neutralization efforts. While policy development has been focused on the "sexual recidivists," other equally important aspects have been neglected. Indeed, this approach does not tackle sexual violence issues such as its prevalence in society or among certain subgroups of the population (i.e., participation), its origins (onset), its volume (individual frequency rate), or its seriousness or termination (desistance). Raising these points is important because it helps to put into perspective the broader issue of sexual violence and its prevention. For example, if prevalence is more important that sexual recidivism, then prevention efforts aimed directly at the general population or the at-risk population might prevent not only sex offending per se, but also sexual recidivism by preventing the onset of sexual criminal careers.

Studying the criminal careers of sex offenders will benefit prevention efforts by explicating the link between sexual and nonsexual offending. If sexual offending and nonsexual offending spring from a common set of risk factors, efforts aimed at preventing general crime among those most likely to be exposed to these risk factors are able to avert nonsexual as well as sexual offending. To the extent, however, that sexual offending trajectories are disconnected from developmental pathways in common crimes, special prevention efforts may be needed to prevent individuals from participating in sexual crimes.

Knowledge on criminal career features, such as escalation, may also benefit decisions about which populations to target to most efficiently prevent certain types of sexual crimes. Criminal career research may, for example, show that violent offenders are more likely to escalate toward rape than are hands-off sex offenders, thus providing guidance as to where rape prevention efforts should best be targeted.

Maturational and typological theories herald early prevention efforts, as prevention is only effective before the tendency to sexually offend is manifest. Dynamic theories in turn recognize that the mechanisms that cause sexual offending may be age-graded and that prevention efforts aimed at different age groups may require a different focus. The answer to the question of whether sexual offending is best explained by maturational or dynamic theories is directly relevant for our efforts to modify sex offenders' criminal careers at different ages and in different career stages.

According to maturational theories, successful efforts – if any – to modify criminal career development are to nip deviant behavioral tendencies in the bud and focus on the very early stages of criminal development, before the tendency to sexually offend becomes sufficiently ingrained in the individual's behavioral repertoire as to withstand any outside influence. Dynamic theories, on the contrary, allow for a greater window of opportunity, and remain positive about possibilities for change even among older sex offenders.

Furthermore, while current interventions aimed at sexual offenders focus mainly on internal factors, like impulse control, sociosexual cognitions, and emotion management, in as far sexual and nonsexual offending are governed by the same causal factors, interventions aimed at sexual offenders could benefit from insights gained from mainstream developmental criminology and also focus on external factors, like increasing the level of social control in the lives of sex offenders.

Maturational theories also speak on incapacitation. On the one hand, maturational theories uphold that those at elevated risk of sexual offending at one point remain at elevated risk throughout their entire life span. While this seems to call for selectively incapacitating those at elevated risk, many maturational theorists have not championed selective incarceration on the grounds that by the time we are able to distinguish the high-risk from the low-risk individuals, the age effect kicks in and the risk of (re)offending starts to decline for everyone (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1986). Given the decline in offending with age, long prison sentences, even when selectively imposed on those presenting the highest risk, will thus yield increasingly lower gains in terms of the number of offenses diverted.

Dynamic theories also do not favor selective incapacitation and emphasize that while in hindsight there are those that follow a persistent trajectory, it is very difficult to predict beforehand which individuals will follow such a trajectory (Laub & Sampson, 2003). According to dynamic theories, accurate prediction is even principally impossible, as each individual's criminal trajectory is partly shaped by random outside influences. These same outside influences add uncertainty to the benefits of selective incapacitation once applied. While free those incapacitated might have experienced transitions and events that could have curbed their criminal trajectories for the better – or the worse – decreasing – or increasing – the benefits of long-term incapacitation.

Typological theories seem most friendly to the idea of long-term incapacitation selectively imposed on those following a persistent trajectory. While intervening can never be too early, it can, according to the typological point of view, be too late, in the sense that once sexual offending becomes ingrained in the individual's behavioral repertoire these behaviors will resist modification. In fact, depending on the extent to which age has an effect on the criminal trajectory of offenders of the persistent type, the only suitable measure to protect the general public from future offending would seem to entail imprisoning these persistent offenders for life. Given that the empirical evidence on sex offenders' criminal careers needed to test these theories is spotted at best, policies that built on these theoretical insights are still founded on shifting sands, leaving much uncertainty about the effectiveness of

these policies to prevent sexual offenders from causing harm and the efficiency by which this goal is reached.

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