2 Developmental and Psychological Theories of Offending

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CHAPTER OUTLINE

DEVELOPMENTAL THEORIES 38
Lahey and Waldman: Developmental propensity theory 38
Moffitt: Adolescence-limited versus life-course-persistent offending 39
Thornberry and Krohn: Interactional theory 40
Sampson and Laub: Age-graded informal social control theory 40
CASE STUDIES: THE CAMBRIDGE STUDY IN DELINQUENT DEVELOPMENT 41

PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES 43
Bowlby: Attachment theory 43
Eysenck: Personality theory 44

Patterson: Social learning theory 46
Walters: Lifestyle theory 47

THE ICAP THEORY 48
Long-term risk factors 48
Explaining the commission of crimes 50

CONCLUSIONS 50

SUMMARY 51

ESSAY/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS 51

REFERENCES 51

ANNOTATED READING LIST 54
In this chapter, we will first review four developmental theories of offending: the developmental propensity theory of Lahey and Waldman (2005), the adolescence-limited / life-course-persistent theory of Moffitt (1993), the interactional theory of Thornberry and Krohn (2005), and the age-graded informal social control theory of Sampson and Laub (2009). For more details about these theories, see Farrington (2005a.) Then we will review four psychological theories: the attachment theory of Bowlby (1969), the personality theory of Eysenck (1996), the social learning theory of Patterson (1982) and the lifestyle theory of Walters (2006). Finally, we will review the integrated cognitive antisocial potential (ICAP) theory (Farrington, 2005b).

### Developmental Theories

#### Developmental and life-course criminology (DLC) theory

Developmental and life-course criminology (DLC) is concerned mainly with three topics: (a) the development of offending and antisocial behaviour from the womb to the tomb; (b) the influence of risk and protective factors at different ages; and (c) the effects of life events on the course of development. Whereas traditional criminological theories aimed to explain between-individual differences in offending, such as why lower-class boys commit more offences than upper-class boys, DLC theories aim to explain within-individual changes in offending over time (Farrington et al., 2002).

In conducting research on development, risk and protective factors, life events and DLC theories, it is essential to carry out prospective longitudinal surveys. I have directed the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, which is a prospective longitudinal survey of over 400 London males from age 8 to age 48 (Farrington et al., 2006; Farrington, Coid et al., 2009). The main reason why developmental and life-course criminology became important during the 1990s was because of the enormous volume and significance of longitudinal research on offending that was published during this decade. Particularly influential were the three ‘causes and correlates’ studies originally mounted by the US Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in Denver, Pittsburgh and Rochester (Huizinga et al., 2003; Loeber et al., 2003; Thornberry et al., 2003). Other important longitudinal projects that came to prominence in the 1990s were the Seattle Social Development Project (Hawkins et al., 2000), the Dunedin study in New Zealand (Moffitt et al., 2001), the Montreal longitudinal-experimental study (Tremblay et al., 2003), and the further analyses by Laub and Sampson (2003) of the classic study by Glueck and Glueck (1950).

#### Lahey and Waldman: Developmental propensity theory

Lahey and Waldman (2005) aimed to explain the development of conduct disorder and juvenile delinquency, focusing particularly on childhood and adolescence. Their developmental propensity theory is influenced by data collected in the Developmental Trends Study (Loeber et al., 2000). Lahey and Waldman do not address adult life events or attempt to explain desistance in the adult years. They assume that it is desirable to distinguish different types of people, but they propose a continuum of developmental trajectories rather than only two categories of adolescence-limited and life-course-persistent offenders, for example.

Their key construct is antisocial propensity, which tends to persist over time and has a wide variety of behavioural manifestations, reflecting the versatility and comorbidity of antisocial behaviour. The most important factors that contribute to antisocial propensity are...
low cognitive ability (especially verbal ability), and three dispositional dimensions: prosociality (including sympathy and empathy, as opposed to callous-unemotional traits); daring (uninhibited or poorly controlled); and negative emotionality (e.g. easily frustrated, bored, or annoyed). These four factors are said to have a genetic basis, and Lahey and Waldman discuss gene-environment interactions.

In an important empirical test of this theory, Lahey et al. (2006) analysed data collected in the Pittsburgh Youth Study and found that prosociality (negatively), daring and negative emotionality at age 7 independently predicted self-reported delinquency between ages 11 and 17. Furthermore, these predictions held up after controlling for major demographic predictors of delinquency such as family income, the mother’s education and ethnicity. In a later test, Lahey et al. (2008) developed the Child and Adolescent Dispositions Scale (CADS) to measure the three dimensions and showed that these predicted conduct disorder in three samples in Georgia, Chicago and Pittsburgh.

**Moffitt: Adolescence-limited versus life-course-persistent offending**

Moffitt (1993) proposed that there are two qualitatively different categories of antisocial people (differing in kind rather than in degree), namely life-course-persistent (LCP) and adolescence-limited (AL) offenders (adolescent-limited offending and life-course-persistent offending). As indicated by these terms, the LCPs start offending at an early age and persist beyond their teenage years. The LCPS are undercontrolled like the ALs, with family adversity, parental psychopathology and low intelligence) and adult-onset offenders (whose existence was doubtful according to Moffitt). She argued that the main factors that encourage offending by the ALs are the ‘maturity gap’ (their inability to achieve adult rewards such as material goods during their teenage years) and peer influence (especially from the LCPS). Consequently, the ALs find it rational to desist from offending when they enter legitimate adult roles and can achieve their desires legally. The ALs can easily desist because they have few neuropsychological deficits. The theory assumes that there can be labelling effects of ‘snares’ such as a criminal record, incarceration, drug or alcohol addiction and (for girls) unwanted pregnancy, especially for the ALs. However, the observed continuity in offending over time is largely driven by the LCPS. The theory focuses mainly on the development of offenders and does not attempt to explain why offences are committed. However, it suggests that the presence of delinquent peers is an important situational influence on ALs, and that LCPS seek out opportunities and victims.

Decision-making in criminal opportunities is supposed to be rational for the ALs (who weigh likely costs against likely benefits) but not for the LCPS (who largely follow well-learned ‘automatic’ behavioural repertoires without thinking). However, the LCPS are mainly influenced by utilitarian motives, whereas the ALs are influenced by teenage boredom. Adult life events such as getting a job or getting married are hypothesised to be of little importance, because the LCPS are too committed to an antisocial lifestyle and the ALs desist naturally as they age into adult roles.

Possibly because it is arguably the earliest and most famous DLC theory, there has been more empirical research on this theory than on any others. Moffitt (2006) published a very impressive review of 10 years of research on her theory. While many of the predictions were confirmed, she discussed the need for additional categories of individuals: abstainers (who were overcontrolled, fearful, sexually timid and unpopular), low-level chronic offenders (who were undercontrolled like the LCPS, with family adversity, parental psychopathology and low intelligence) and adult-onset offenders (whose existence was doubtful according to Moffitt). She argued that the abstainers in adolescence did not become adult-onset offenders, but Zara and Farrington (2009) found that adult-onset offenders in the Cambridge study tended to be nervous and to have few friends at age 8–10, as well as still being sexual virgins at age 18.
**Thornberry and Krohn: Interactional theory**

The interactional theory of Thornberry and Krohn (2005) particularly focuses on factors encouraging antisocial behaviour at different ages. It is influenced by findings in the Rochester Youth Development Study (Thornberry et al., 2003). Thornberry and Krohn do not propose types of offenders but suggest that the causes of antisocial behaviour vary for children who start at different ages. At the earliest ages (birth to 6), the three most important factors are neuropsychological deficit and difficult temperament (e.g. impulsiveness, negative emotionality, fearlessness, poor emotion regulation), parenting deficits (e.g. poor monitoring, low affective ties, inconsistent discipline, physical punishment) and structural adversity (e.g. poverty, unemployment, welfare dependency, a disorganised neighbourhood). They also suggest that structural adversity might cause poor parenting.

Neuropsychological deficits are less important for children who start antisocial behaviour at older ages. At ages 6–12, neighbourhood and family factors are particularly salient, while at ages 12–18 school and peer factors dominate (Figure 2.1). Thornberry and Krohn also suggest that deviant opportunities, gangs and deviant social networks are important for onset at ages 12–18. They propose that late starters (ages 18–25) have cognitive deficits such as low intelligence and poor school performance but that they have been protected from antisocial behaviour at earlier ages by a supportive family and school environment. At ages 18–25, they find it hard to make a successful transition to adult roles such as employment and marriage.

The most distinctive feature of this interactional theory is its emphasis on reciprocal causation. For example, it is proposed that the child’s antisocial behaviour elicits coercive responses from parents and rejection by peers, and makes antisocial behaviour more likely in the future. The theory does not postulate a single key construct underlying offending but suggests that children who start early tend to continue because of the persistence of neuropsychological and parenting deficits and structural adversity. Interestingly, Thornberry and Krohn predict that late starters (ages 18–25) will show more continuity over time than earlier starters (ages 12–18) because the late starters have more cognitive deficits. In an earlier exposition of the theory, Thornberry & Krohn (2001) proposed that desistance was caused by changing social influences (e.g. stronger family bonding), protective factors (e.g. high intelligence and school success) and intervention programmes. Hence, they think that criminal justice processing has an effect on future offending.

Thornberry (2005) has also extended this theory to explain the intergenerational transmission of antisocial behaviour. He suggested that the parent’s prosocial or antisocial bonding, structural adversity, stressors and ineffective parenting mediated the link between the parent’s antisocial behaviour and the child’s antisocial behaviour. Thornberry et al. (2009) tested these ideas in the Rochester Intergenerational Study and concluded that parental stress and ineffective parenting were the most important mediating factors.

**Sampson and Laub: Age-graded informal social control theory**

The key construct in Sampson and Laub’s (2005) theory is age-graded informal social control, which means the strength of bonding to family, peers, schools and, later, adult social institutions such as marriages and jobs. Sampson and Laub primarily aimed to explain why people do not commit offences, on the assumption that why people want to offend is unproblematic (presumably caused by hedonistic desires) and that offending is inhibited by