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REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Burgess-Proctor asserts that all three factors—race/ethnicity, social class, and gender—are equally important when it comes to engaging in criminal behavior or processing by the criminal justice system. From your own experience, do you agree? If so, why? If not, which characteristic of these do you think is most important, and why?

2. Studies have consistently shown that most victims of homicide by rate are lower-class, Black males, and that the offenders by rate are lower-class, Black males. How do you think this finding relates to Burgess-Proctor’s discussion? Is it consistent or not?

3. How do you think an upper-class White male would be treated by the criminal justice system as compared to a lower-class Black female? What advice would you offer to the latter defendant?

4. Which of the five feminist criminological perspectives do you most agree with? Which of these five types do you least agree with? Do your selections vary depending on whether you are contemplating the reasons why females commit crime or considering how females are handled by the criminal justice system? If so, how?

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Life-Course Perspectives of Criminality

This section will discuss the development of the life-course perspective in the late 1970s and its influence on modern research on criminal trajectories. We will explain the various concepts in the life-course perspective, such as onset, desistance, and frequency, as well as the arguments against this perspective. Finally, we will review the current state of research regarding this perspective.

This section will present one of the most current and progressive approaches to explaining why individuals engage in criminal activity, namely, developmental theories of criminal behavior. Developmental theories are explanatory models of criminal behavior that follow individuals throughout their life courses of offending, thus explaining the development of offending over time. Such developmental theories represent a break with traditional theoretical frameworks, which typically focused on the effects of constructs and variables on behavior at a given point in time. Virtually no theories attempted to explain the various stages (e.g., onset, desistance) of individuals’ criminal careers, and certainly no models differentiated the varying factors that are important at each stage. Developmental theories have been prominent in modern times, and we believe that readers will agree that developmental theories have added a great deal to our understanding of and thinking about why people commit criminal behavior.

Developmental Theories

Developmental theories, which are also to some extent integrated, 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 onset, frequency, intensity, duration, desistance, and other aspects of the individual’s criminal career. The onset of offending is when the offender first begins offending, and desistance is
when an individual stops committing crime. Frequency refers to how often the individual offends, whereas intensity is the degree of seriousness of the offenses he or she commits. Finally, duration is the length of an individual’s criminal career.1

Experts have long debated and examined these various aspects of the development of criminal behavior. For example, virtually all studies show an escalation from minor status offending (e.g., truancy, underage drinking, smoking tobacco) to petty crimes (e.g., shoplifting, smoking marijuana) to far more serious criminal activity, such as robbery and aggravated assault, and then murder and rape. This development of criminality is shown across every minor offending and progress toward more serious, violent offenses.

Although this trend is undisputed, other issues are not yet resolved. For example, 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.2 However, other experts would disagree and say that this line should be drawn earlier (say, 12 years old) or even later (such as 16 years old). Still, however it is defined, 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.

Perhaps the most discussed and researched aspect of developmental theory is offender frequency, which has been referred to as lambda. Estimates of lambda, or average frequency of offending by criminals over a year’s time, vary greatly.3 Some estimates of lambda are in the high single digits, and some are in the triple digits. Given this large range, it does not do much good to estimate what the frequency of most offenders is. Rather, the frequency depends on many, many variables, such as what type of offenses the individual commits. Perhaps if we were studying only drug users or rapists, it might make sense to determine lambda, but given the general nature of most examinations of crime, such estimates are not useful. Even within the same crime type, the frequency of offending varies so widely across individuals that we question its use in understanding criminal careers.

Before we discuss the dominant models of developmental theory, it is important to discuss the opposing viewpoint, which is that of complete stability in offending. Such counterpoint views assume that the developmental approach is a waste of time because the same individuals who show antisocial behavior at early ages (before age 10) are those who will exhibit the most criminality in their teenage years, 20s, 30s, 40s, and so on. This framework is most notably represented by the theoretical perspective proposed by Gottfredson and Hirschi in their model of low self-control.

Antidevelopmental Theory: Low Self-Control Theory

In 1990, Travis Hirschi, along with his colleague Michael Gottfredson, proposed a general theory of low self-control as the primary cause of all crime and deviance (see prior discussion in Section VII); this is often referred to as the

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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.

Like other control theories of crime, this theory (see Figure 10.1) assumes that individuals are born predisposed to selfish, self-centered activities, and that only effective child rearing and socialization can create self-control. Without such adequate socialization (i.e., social controls) and reduction of criminal opportunities, individuals will continue their natural tendencies to become selfish predators. The general theory of crime assumes individuals will forever exhibit low self-control. The assumption that self-control must be established by age 10. If it has not formed by that time, then according to the theory, the feature of this theory that opposes the developmental perspective. The authors argue that once low self-control is indeed change over time.

Like others, Gottfredson and Hirschi attribute the formation of controls to socialization processes in the first years of life; the distinguishing characteristic of this theory is its emphasis on the individual's ability to control himself or herself. That is, the general theory of crime 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 more valid theories of crime.4 This is probably due to the parsimony, or simplicity, of the theory, as it identifies only one primary cause of criminality—low self-control. However, low self-control may actually consist of a series of personality traits, including risk-taking, impulsiveness, self-centeredness, short-term orientation, and quick temper. Recent research has supported the idea that inadequate child-rearing practices tend to result in lower levels of self-control among children and that these low levels produce various risky behaviors, including criminal activity.5 It is important to note that 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 noted antidiscipline theory actually includes a strong developmental aspect.

In contrast to Gottfredson and Hirschi's model, one of the most dominant and researched frameworks of the last 20 years, 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 Sampson and Laub's developmental model.

Sampson and Laub's Developmental Model

Perhaps the best-known and best-researched developmental theoretical model to date is that of Robert Sampson and John Laub. Sampson and Laub have proposed a developmental framework that largely based on a reanalysis of

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original data collected by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck in the 1940s. As a prototypical developmental model, this theoretical perspective focuses primarily on individual stability and change.

Most significantly, Sampson and Laub emphasized the importance of certain event and life changes, which can alter an individual's decisions to commit (or not commit) criminal activity. Although based on a social control framework, this model contains elements of two other theoretical perspectives. First, Sampson and Laub's model assumes, like other developmental perspectives, that early antisocial tendencies among individuals, regardless of social variables, are often linked to later adult criminal offending. Furthermore, some social structure factors (e.g., family structure, poverty) also tend to lead to problems in social and educational development, which then leads to crime. Another key factor in this development of criminality is the influence of delinquent peers or siblings, which further increases an individual's likelihood of delinquency.

However, Sampson and Laub also strongly emphasize the importance of transitions, or events that are important in altering life trajectories, such as marriage, employment, or military service, drastically changing a person's criminal career. Sampson and Laub show 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. In some ways, this model is a more specified form of David Matza's theory of drift, which we discussed in Section VIII, in which individuals tend to grow out of crime and desistance due to the social controls imposed by marriage, employment, and so on. Still, Sampson and Laub's framework contributed much to the knowledge of criminal offending by providing a more specified and grounded framework that identified the ability of individuals to change their criminal trajectories via life-altering transitions. In fact, recent research has consistently shown that marriage and full-time employment significantly reduce the recidivism of California parolees, and other recent studies have shown similar results from employment in later years.8

Moffitt's Developmental Taxonomy

Another primary developmental model that has had a profound effect on the current state of criminological thought and theorizing is Terrie Moffitt's developmental theory (taxonomy), proposed in 1993.9 Moffitt's framework distinguishes two types of offenders: adolescence-limited offenders and life-course-persistent offenders.

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Adolescence-limited offenders make up most of the general public and include all persons who committed offenses when they are teenagers or young adults. Their offending is largely caused by association with peers and a desire to engage in activities exhibited by the adults that they are trying to be. Such activities are a type of rite of passage and quite normal among all people who have normal social interactions with their peers in their teen-age or young adult years. It should be noted that a very small percentage of the population (about 1% to 3%) are nonoffenders who quite frankly do not have normal relations with their peers and therefore do not offend at all, even in adolescence.

On the other hand, there exists another small group of offenders, referred to in this model as life-course-persistent offenders. This small group, estimated to be 4% to 8% of offenders—albeit the most violent and chronic—commit the vast majority of the serious, violent offenses in any society, such as murder, rape, and armed robbery. In contrast to the adolescence-limited offenders, the disposition of life-course-persistent offenders toward offending is caused by an entirely different model: an interaction between neurological problems and the disadvantaged or criminalological environments in which they are raised.

For example, if an individual has only neurological problems or only a poor, disadvantaged environment, then that individual will be unlikely to develop a life-course-persistent trajectory toward crime. However, if a person has both neurological problems and a disadvantaged environment, then that individual will have a very high likelihood of becoming a chronic, serious, violent offender. This proposition, which has been supported by empirical studies, suggests that it is important to pay attention to what happens early in life. Because illegal behaviors are normal among teenagers or young adults, more insight can be gained by looking at the years prior to age 12 to determine who is most likely to become a chronic, violent offender. Life-course-persistent offenders begin offending very early in life and continue to commit crime into adulthood, even to middle age, whereas adolescence-limited offenders tend to engage in criminal activity only during their teen-age and young adult years. Moffitt’s model suggests that more than one type of development explains criminality. Furthermore, this framework shows that different types of offenders commit crime due to entirely different causes and factors.

### 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 concerns the 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. The United States is one of the few developed nations that do not guarantee this type of maternal and infant medical care and supervision. Doing so would go a long way toward avoiding the costly (in many ways) damages of criminal behavior among youths at risk.21

Furthermore, there should be legally mandated interventions for pregnant women who are addicted to drugs or alcohol. Although this is a highly controversial topic, it appears to be a no-brainer that women who suffer from such addictions may become highly toxic to the child(ren) they carry and should receive closer supervision and more health care. There may be no policy implementation that would have as much influence on reducing future criminality in children as making sure their mothers do not take toxic substances while they are pregnant.22

Other policy implications include assigning special caseworkers to high-risk infants, such as those with low birth weight or low Apgar scores. 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.23 Finally, 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.24

Ultimately, as the many developmental theories have shown, there are many concepts and stages of life that can have a profound effect on the criminological trajectories that lives can take. However, virtually all of these models propose that the earlier stages of life are likely the most important in determining whether an individual will engage in criminal activity throughout life or not. Therefore, policy makers should focus their efforts on providing care and interventions in this time period.

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19See Tibbitts and Piperno, "Influence of Gender." For a recent review of such studies, see Wright et al., Criminals in the Making (see chap. 1). See also Savage, Development of Persistent Criminality.

20Wright et al., Criminals in the Making, 260–62.

21Ibid., 184–86, 258.

22Ibid., 219–62.

23Ibid.
Conclusion
This section presented a brief discussion of the importance of developmental or life-course theories of criminal behavior. This perspective, having become popular in the 1970s, is relatively new compared to other traditional theories explored in this text. Ultimately, 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.

Then we examined the policy implications of this developmental approach, emphasizing the need to provide universal care for pregnant mothers as well as their newborn children. Other policy implications include legally mandated interventions for mothers who are addicted to toxic substances (e.g., alcohol, drugs) and assignment of caseworkers to high-risk infants and children, such as those with a history of complications at birth. Such interventions would go a long way toward saving society the many problems (e.g., financial difficulties, victimization) that will persist without such interventions. Ultimately, a focus on the earliest stages of intervention will provide "the biggest bang for the buck."

Section Summary
- Developmental or life-course theory focuses on the individual, following people throughout life to examine their offending careers. In-depth considerations of changes during the life course are of highest concern, especially regarding general conclusions that can be made about the factors that tend to increase or decrease the risk that individuals will continue offending.
- Life-course perspectives emphasize onset of offending, frequency of offending, duration of offending, seriousness of offending, desistance of offending, and other factors that play key roles in when individuals offend and why they do so—or don't 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 it assumes that propensities for crime do not change over time but rather remain unchanged across life.
- One of the developmental models that has received the most attention is that of Sampson and Laub, which emphasizes transitions in life (e.g., marriage, military service, employment) that alter trajectories either toward or away from crime.
- Moffitt's developmental theory of chronic offenders (whom she labeled life-course-persistent offenders) versus more normal offenders (whom 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 that combine to create chronic, habitual offenders.

WEB RESOURCES
Developmental Theories of Crime
http://coodey.libarts.wsu.edu/gurina/Soc3612/Documents/Lecture_20.ppt

Sampson and Laub's Model

Terrie Moffitt's Theory

KEY TERMS
- adolescence-limited offenders
- life-course-persistent offenders
- developmental theories
- Moffitt's developmental theory (taxonomy)
- trajectory
- transitions

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
1. What characteristic distinguishes developmental theories from traditional theoretical frameworks?
2. What aspects of a criminal career do experts consider important in such a model? Describe all of the aspects they look at in a person's criminal career.