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**Citation:** CHAMBERLAIN, J.M., 2015. *Criminological theory in context: an introduction*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

**Additional Information:**

- This book was published by SAGE Publications Ltd. Chapter Eight: Postmodern Critical Standpoints and the Criminal Life Course, has been made available here as a sample by kind permission of SAGE and is also available on their website at: [http://www.uk.sagepub.com/upm-data/66771\\_Criminological\\_Theory\\_in\\_Context\\_\\_Chapter\\_8.pdf](http://www.uk.sagepub.com/upm-data/66771_Criminological_Theory_in_Context__Chapter_8.pdf).

**Metadata Record:** <https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/16906>

**Version:** Published

**Publisher:** SAGE Publications Ltd . © John Martyn Chamberlain

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# **CRIMINOLOGICAL THEORY IN CONTEXT**

# 8

## POSTMODERN CRITICAL STANDPOINTS AND THE CRIMINAL LIFE COURSE

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### CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The chapter explores the development of the contemporary Critical criminological concern with the life course of offending behaviour. It begins by outlining how

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Critical criminological positions encompass a range of differing approaches, all of which have their own particular emphases and nuances, and furthermore, they have been categorised under various headings, including Marxist criminology, Radical criminology, Left Realism, Feminist criminology, Sociological criminology or the Sociology of Deviance, Peacemaking criminology and Cultural criminology, to name but a few. This chapter then discusses how influencing the development of Critical standpoints in criminology and the emphasis on the duality of structure has been the rejection of positivism and the emergence of postmodern sensibilities. This leads on to discuss how postmodernist anti-realist viewpoints accord equal validity to all perspectives and voices. This position is congruent with contemporary Critical criminology perspectives, such as Cultural criminology, as well as qualitative research methodologies. It has led to the development of an increasing focus within criminology over the last three decades on narrative and biographical life story forms of qualitative research as part of a broader concern with tracing the life course of offending behaviour.

The chapter then discusses how the development of Life Course criminology is not solely bound up with the postmodern narrative turn within Critical forms of criminology. Indeed, Life Course criminology can arguably trace its roots back to the early Chicago School discussed in Chapter 5. The chapter highlights how Life Course criminology focuses on tracing over time the life trajectories and stories of criminals. As well as that it is viewed as an integrated theory of crime in that it seeks to incorporate both developmental biological-psychological and social factors within its analysis of the criminal career trajectory from youth delinquency to adult offending. The chapter then explores two influential Life Course theories: Moffitt's Dual Taxonomy (1993) and Sampson and Laub's Age Graded Stability and Change Model (1993).

After outlining these respective theories, the chapter concludes by highlighting that research does seem to show that institutions, such as the family, school, employment and so on, have differing capacities to modify criminal trajectories at different stages in the life course. It is suggested that during the early years family relationships are important in shaping behaviour, however as children grow direct parental impact lessens and peer groups and social institutions such as schools become more important, while in adulthood schools and parents both take a backseat to jobs and spouses as primary mechanisms for social control. As a result Life Course criminologists often argue for the value of implementing a broad range of preventive school and penal system based interventions to promote a change in the criminal career trajectory. However, it is noted that this approach is often at odds with the more punitive Right Realist youth crime agenda of most western societies of the last three decades, which has seen an increase in juvenile punishment and incarceration rates worldwide.

## INTRODUCTION: CRITICAL CRIMINOLOGY REVISITED

This chapter builds on the material covered in previous chapters to examine the impact of postmodernism on contemporary criminology as well as the emergence

of a life course perspective, which is a somewhat relatively new way of thinking about how an individual's life is determined through the occurrence of certain life events, including their experience of deviant and criminal acts, both as victim and offender. Previous chapters have historically traced the development of criminology as a discipline by examining the emergence in western societies over the last 200 years of rational choice, psychological, biological and sociological theoretical approaches to examining the causes of crime. In doing so, the chapters reinforced the value of acknowledging the role of psychological and biological factors in influencing human behaviour, particularly when examining topics such as the care and treatment of mentally disordered as well as violent and sex offenders, while at the same time emphasising the central role of society in both creating and shaping responses to the problem of crime. Indeed, contemporary academic criminology is arguably dominated by a critical concern with issues of social diversity, power and inequality when it comes to addressing the highly complex and multilayered problem that is crime (Young, 2011).

The historical development of Critical criminological positions discussed from Chapter 6 onwards readily attests to the fact that it is a highly complex area of the criminological corpus. It certainly encompasses a range of differing approaches, all of which have their own particular emphases and nuances, and furthermore, they have been categorised under various headings – Marxist criminology, Radical criminology, Left Realism, Feminist criminology, Sociological criminology or the Sociology of Deviance, Peacemaking criminology and Cultural Criminology, to name but a few (Radzinowicz, 1999). There is no single way of marking out a clear path through these various critical positions. However, we can for the sake of clarity say that a key distinguishing feature of Critical forms of criminology is that they reject utterly and completely the notion that a disinterested and value-free criminology is possible, and indeed, they by and large embrace the fact that their work is value-loaded, for they stand in complete opposition to unequal political, economic and social structures and relationships. Critical forms of criminology are therefore politically engaged and focus attention on the role played by broader socio-structural factors, such as socio-economic and gender-based inequalities, rather than viewpoints that emphasise biological and psychological developmental factors, in shaping how a person responds to being labelled a criminal and seeks to manage a 'spoiled identity' (Young, 2011). This is because underpinning the various Critical criminology positions is a shared point of view which rejects the emphasis placed by situational crime prevention perspectives and rational choice models of crime and criminality on the individual social actor as the source and cause of crime and criminality. Rather, although they by and large accept that people indeed do choose to engage in deviance and crime, Critical criminological viewpoints emphasise the role played by prevailing social circumstances and conditions in shaping the actions of both law makers and law breakers (Chamberlain, 2013).

Up until the 1960s mainstream criminological thinking was heavily influenced by the work of Durkheim, who adopted a functionalist position regarding

how societies operate and who therefore saw that crime was useful for society. One of the key features of Durkheim's work was that he liked to emphasise order and consensus in society and how group bonds form in and through shared norms and values. Therefore, Durkheim focused on deviance and crime as something whose function is to help maintain a sense of common feeling amongst society's members by enabling the mass of people – i.e. lawful citizens – to identify with each other and create common social ties and bonds, through differentiating themselves from the law breakers. Labelling Theory, which emerged from the Chicago School of the sociology of deviance in the 1960s, by and large shares this approach as it emphasises how the societal reaction to acts of crime creates consensus amongst groups of people that certain individuals are deviant. However, as Chapters 6 and 7 outlined, Critical criminology first emerged in the 1960s and 1970s under the banner of Marxist and then Feminist criminology. Both of which, in contrast to Labelling Theory and functionalist viewpoints, adopt a conflict perspective when examining society in general and the problem of crime in particular. That is, they see society as being shaped by conflicts amongst people who have competing self- and group interests. Even though at any one time a society may seem to agree on basic values and goals, such as the individual's right to pursue love, happiness and a rewarding career and family life, the existence of scarce resources and the tendency for them to be allocated unequally, means that someone (or some group) is benefiting at the expense of someone else.

Indeed, Critical criminologists tend to argue that the key groups at a disadvantage in western nation-states (and some would say worldwide as well) are women, ethnic minorities and the poor and socially excluded. Yet people on the losing end may not recognise or admit that their interests are in conflict with the interests of others, when in fact they are. It is argued that conflict is ubiquitous and historic, and furthermore, consists of a struggle over three related things: money, power and influence. Those who have more of them try to keep things the way they are; those who have less of them favour change so that they get a bigger share. The groups with wealth, power and influence are favoured in the conflict precisely because those resources put them in a dominant position. For Critical criminologists it is 'the have's' rather than 'the have not's' who make the rules, control the content and flow of ideas and information, and design and impose penalties for non-conformity. Sometimes the struggle for resources is blatant and bloody, but more often than not it is subtle and restrained. Various factors are pointed out as contributing to this. An important idea here first put forward in the 1970s by Marxist criminology was the notion of 'false consciousness'. This is the view that the dominant group is able to promote beliefs and values that support the existing social order to such an extent that the disadvantaged groups actually believe their interests are served by the prevailing social conditions, when in fact they are not. Think here about how you are often told that if you behave yourself and don't get into trouble with the police, or at least not too much trouble, and get a good education and work hard both in your studies and when you get your first real job after leaving university, then you will

eventually work your way up the career ladder, and this will in turn enable you to have the lifestyle you want: so you can go on holidays, buy a car, afford to give your children nice things, get a house, and so on. Whether or not we might find this an attractive proposition, for Marxist criminologists what you are being sold here is nothing more than a gilded cage of your own making. This is because you are not being brought up to have a free life controlling your own labour and its benefits. Rather, you are being trained and prepared for a life as a cog in a machine which cares little for you, and indeed, just wants you to keep deluding yourself so it can extract the surplus value of your labour and turn it into a profit for the shareholders of the company you work for. What is more, these companies you work for are so interconnected and globalised that they sell the surplus value they extract from you back to you in the form of consumerist goods and gadgets, which in reality you don't need but think you can't survive without because you've been seduced into believing you can't.

As the 1970s and 1980s progressed Critical forms of criminology began to systematically examine how different forms of oppression, inequality and conflict affect people in everyday life, as well as in the sphere of crime and law. They were particularly interested in how structural inequalities evident in a society's class, race and gender structures affect, firstly, participation in crime; secondly, how crime is defined; and thirdly, the making and enforcement of laws. To do this, they examined crime relative to social, economic and political structures and forms of inequality, as found in a given society at a particular point in history. For example, Critical criminologists of a Marxist viewpoint, such as Richard Quinney (1979), argued that most crime is a rational response to the structure of social and cultural life and its associated key regulatory and bureaucratic institutions, which he held emphasised free-market economics. Crime, in other words, is a means of survival in a society within which survival is never guaranteed due to the structural inequalities that permeate it as a result of an underpinning emphasis upon free-market competition as the basis for westernised ways of life. For Quinney, any analysis of western criminal justice and legal systems must take into account how its fundamentally capitalist economic structure developed and is organised to protect the interests of certain groups who benefit most from this state of affairs. This is a point which led him to also conclude that crime is a social construct and criminologists must therefore not simply look at the law breakers, but the law makers and law keepers too.

It is important to note that when Critical criminologists speak about race, class and gender they use the terms differently from other criminologists, such as Classical criminologists, Psychological and Biological criminologists, labelling theorists, as well as Durkheimian inspired Sociological criminologists. For these other criminologists key concepts such as race, class and gender tend to be interpreted as characteristics of individuals and are used to identify subjects of study, such as the 'middle-class', or 'female victims'. But for Critical criminologists, race, class and gender are at the same time both identities and structures. As structures, race, class and gender contain culturally and historically

specific rules that define (1) the types of power a group possesses, (2) a group's social and economic positions within society and (3) the opportunities for success people from these groups typically possess. As identities, race, class and gender tell us something about the social expectations concerning the behaviour of people from different groups, and the ways in which people act to construct themselves – that is, their sense of personal identity in relation to their gender, their class, or their race. So 'middle-class' defines a location in the social structure, which in turn defines the types of power persons can access and wield, their opportunities or pathways to success, and the forms of oppressive conditions which they control or which control them. But 'being middle-class' also defines behavioural expectations, and we expect middle-class people to behave in particular ways. We identify middle-class people by what job they might have, what their income is likely to be, how they dress, where they went to school, and so on. In short, the starting point for Critical criminology is that a person's structural location carries with it different forms of access and opportunities and different behavioural expectations, and from this point of view, these differences are evidence of inequality and these inequalities help explain the probability that people located in different structural locations will engage in crime or will be labelled criminal.

This leads us to a key point about Critical forms of criminology concerning notions of free will and determinism in relation to the choice of the individual to engage in crime. Early forms of Critical criminology, such as Marxist criminology, tended to be overly structurally deterministic, in that they emphasised how economic factors can drive social change and as a result tended to presume that your class determines your life chances and who you are. Clearly such a position can be criticised for being overly reductionist as not every sphere of human relations is reducible to economic factors. As a result, critical positions that emerged from the 1990s onwards, such as Cultural criminology and Peacemaking criminology, emphasised agency and individual freedom. This shift in emphasis is seen as necessary to ensure that Critical criminology does not lose sight of the fact that not every person who is subject to a socially determined factor, such as poverty or racial inequality, chooses to commit crime. Indeed, most contemporary Critical criminological viewpoints recognise what can be termed 'the duality of structure'. Meaning that they focus on the fact that people clearly are a product of their social environment, which does constrain and shape their behaviour, how they think, as well as the opportunities they have open to them in a given social situation. This can be seen in the common patterns of human behaviour and shared life experiences which operate on a day-to-day level all around us. However, people do nevertheless possess agency and free will, and furthermore, certain structures in society can actually act to enhance agency. For example, we may here think about certain institutional bureaucratic structures which seek to protect the individual from intimidation on behalf of more powerful social groups or forces, such as equal opportunity or human rights legislation. Structure, in other words, isn't necessarily a bad thing, and furthermore, contemporary Critical criminology reminds us that it is



important to recognise the importance of both the positive and negative aspects of structure and agency when studying crime and deviance (Young, 2011).

### Box 8.1 Key summary points

- Critical criminological positions encompass a range of differing approaches, all of which have their own particular emphases and nuances, and furthermore, they have been categorised under various headings: including Marxist criminology, Radical criminology, Left Realism, Feminist criminology, Sociological criminology or the Sociology of Deviance, Peacemaking criminology and Cultural criminology.
- Critical criminologists adopt a conflict perspective when examining society in general and the problem of crime in particular. That is, they see society as being shaped by conflicts amongst people who have competing self- and group interests.
- For Critical criminologists, core analytical concepts, such as race, class and gender, are at the same time both identities and structures. As structures race, class and gender contain culturally and historically specific rules that define (1) the types of power a group possesses, (2) a group's social and economic positions within society and (3) the opportunities for success people from these groups typically possess. As identities, race, class and gender tell us something about the social expectations concerning the behaviour of people from different groups, and the ways in which people act to construct themselves, that is their sense of personal identity in relation to their gender, their class, or their race.
- Earlier Critical standpoints, such as Marxism and Feminism, can be accused of being too deterministic when it comes to analysing the impact of social factors on individual behaviour, including behaviour labelled as deviant and criminal. However, contemporary Critical criminological viewpoints recognise what can be termed 'the duality of structure' – meaning that they focus on the fact that people clearly are a product of their social environment, which does constrain and shape their behaviour, how they think, as well as the opportunities they have open to them in a given social situation. This can be seen in the common patterns of human behaviour and shared life experiences which operate on a day-to-day level all around us. However, people do nevertheless possess agency and free will, and furthermore, certain structures in society can actually act to enhance agency, i.e. legislation to promote equal opportunities.

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## POSITIVISM AND REALISM, POSTMODERNISM AND ANTI-REALISM

A key factor influencing the development of Critical standpoints in criminology and the emphasis on the duality of structure has been the rejection of positivism and the emergence of postmodern sensibilities. Positivism was discussed when Biological criminology was discussed in Chapter 3 and Psychological criminology in Chapter 4. Positivism adopts a philosophical stance of realism as it assumes there is an objective reality that exists independently to human beings and emphasises the need for a researcher to engage in systematic observation and experiment in a value-neutral and dispassionate manner in order to discover underlying causal laws of behaviour. Criminologists working in the Biological and Psychological traditions by and large utilise this approach to inform policy making through focusing on obtaining statistical evidence of ‘what works’ in relation to a range of criminal justice policy initiatives, interventions and crime reduction strategies. These include prison administration, community-based crime prevention, rehabilitative diversion schemes for youth and adult offenders with mental health problems, domestic violence programmes, as well as interventions to tackle alcohol and substance abuse related crime (Sherman, 2012). Meanwhile, a general bias within contemporary criminology towards positivism, in the form of both experimental and survey-based research, can be deduced from examining the methodology adopted by empirical research studies published in leading criminology and criminal justice journals (Kleck et al., 2006). However, this bias is slightly more prevalent in the US than other western societies. For example Tewksbury et al. (2010) undertook a detailed content analysis of leading academic journals. They found that only 5.7 percent of published articles in American criminology and criminal justice journals (*Criminology*, *Criminology and Public Policy*) relied on qualitative data and analysis compared to 27.2 percent in leading international journals (*British Journal of Criminology*, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology* and *Canadian Journal of Criminology*).

The findings of Tewksbury et al. (2010) reinforce the preference for quantitative criminology in America but they also demonstrate more generally the relatively heavy emphasis placed internationally on quantitative methods within criminology, at least in terms of published research in leading academic journals. This is perhaps to be expected. The use of large-scale survey methods to capture snapshots of criminal activity and the victim experience of crime, alongside the dynamics of criminal justice processes and outcomes, is tightly bound up with the emergence of criminology as a discipline during the nineteenth century, as well as the contemporary development of policy-oriented criminology as it has sought to generate a statistical evidence base from which to influence governmental practice (Young, 2011). Statistical information on crime patterns were first gathered in Europe in the nineteenth century by early Neoclassical and Biological criminologists as well as in the early part of the twentieth century in

American criminology by researchers and academics working in Chicago (Knepper, 2007). As the twentieth century progressed, governments internationally recognised the value of systematically collecting statistical information to inform decision-making and policy development. The practical utility of the information provided by victim surveys, police operational statistics, court sentencing outcome data, crime reporting patterns in urban and rural areas, alongside a wealth of other criminal justice outcome data, has been held by some to reinforce the validity of the viewpoint that the methods of the natural sciences are appropriate for understanding crime and criminality, and furthermore, for making both these social constructs amenable to governmental manipulation and control (Sherman, 2012). Survey-based criminology enables the large-scale collection of descriptive statistical information (i.e. the prevalence of burglary) as well as the use of analytical statistics where correlation tests are applied to two or more variables (i.e. if a person has been a victim of burglary in relation to whether they live in an urban or rural area) in order to test a hypothesis (i.e. that people in rural areas are less likely to be victims of burglary than their city dwelling counterparts). Survey-based criminology typically distributes questionnaires and/or conducts survey interviews with a target sample from a larger study population. More recently, the internet and modern mobile technologies have made electronic and online surveys possible (Chamberlain, 2013).

For all the positive impact of such approaches, many Critical criminologists argue that their discipline cannot adopt the methods of the natural sciences to identify underlying causal patterns at work when crime occurs; often because they feel uneasy about the positivist distinction between facts and values. This perhaps can be most clearly seen in the experimentalist viewpoint that it is the role of criminology to produce facts to advise policy makers without considering the values at play in the governmental decision-making process (Sherman, 2012), while it is arguable criminology must not be limited to the research questions suggested by the social control priorities of the governmental project. To argue otherwise denies it the ability to operate independently and if need be, focus its attention on the state and its crime control agencies when their actions engender harm. Furthermore, criminology encounters problems when it tries to promote evidence-based decision-making under the guise of a social-scientific cloak of objectivity and neutrality, not least of all because there is no such thing as an 'ideology-free zone' (Knepper, 2007: 9). Indeed, underpinning wariness of positivism of much of contemporary Critical criminology is post-modernism, with its anti-realist undertones, which has been hugely influential in the intellectual development of politically engaged Marxist, Feminist, Realist, Cultural and Sociological forms of criminology.

The realist position appears commonsensical: as we go about our everyday lives we typically assume the world around us existed before we were born and indeed will continue to exist after we die. What is more, human beings who live, work and play together tend to possess shared values and beliefs about the nature of the world in which they live which guide how they interact with each other, in part because these shared values and beliefs are internalised by

individuals from a young age through the processes of socialisation. Furthermore these objectively and materially confront us on a day-to-day basis as external 'social facts' in the form of social organisations and institutions which embody communally shared values and ideals that act to channel individual human behaviour in socially acceptable ways.

But realism has been increasingly challenged over the last few decades by the rise of anti-realist postmodern positions. Postmodernism is an intellectual movement which highlights the contingent nature of human knowledge, holding that accounts of the world are social constructions which do not exist independently of the social actor and the language they use to describe the world around them (Silverman, 2007). The intellectual heritage of postmodernism lies in the traditions of idealist and relativist western philosophy. This suggests we cannot know anything about the so-called 'real world', rather everything we experience is mediated through mental and linguistic constructs. Due to its relativistic take on the nature of human knowledge the postmodernist anti-realist viewpoint accords equal validity to all perspectives and voices. In doing so it often also denies that any one ethical position can be privileged over another. This is a state of affairs some individuals find difficult to accept. As although they may recognise the historically situated and socially constructed nature of human beliefs and values it is also possible to argue that moral absolutes do exist in the social world, particularly in regard to what constitutes appropriate behaviour towards other individuals given the embodied nature of the shared human condition. Hence varying points of extreme exist in the anti-realist postmodern position. Some stress the socially constructed nature of social reality. They acknowledge the active role played by individuals within this process without doing away with the idea that social reality exists externally to the individual and constrains their behaviour. Others insist that the social world does not exist independently of the social actor and the language used to describe it. For example Potter (1996: 98) argues, '[the world] ... is constituted in one way or another as people talk about it, write about it and argue it'. Whether one agrees with their arguments or not, anti-realist positions bring to the fore the idea that researchers present their own interpretation of the social world rather than a definitive account of it (Chamberlain, 2013).

## **Narrative and life story research within criminology**

This anti-realist postmodern emphasis on rejecting objectivity and value-free research is congruent with Critical criminology perspectives as well as qualitative research methodologies, which has led to the development of an increasing focus within criminology over the last three decades on narrative and life story qualitative research (Chamberlain, 2013). Many narrative criminologists readily acknowledge that their work is driven by a personal ethical and political commitment to improving the individual and social conditions of socially excluded and stigmatised groups. Such a stance is argued to be particularly important

when dealing with sensitive topics, such as domestic violence for example. Consequently Clandinin and Connolly (2000) talk about ‘living the story’ with research participants so a researcher works collaboratively in a participatory fashion with both individuals and communities to engender social change.

One only needs to look at the ‘true crime’ section of any high street bookshop to realise the popularity of life stories and insider accounts of criminal life. Within academic criminological research narrative biographies and life stories tend to focus on critical incidents or significant turning points in a life. These are used to explore an individual’s relationship to crime from their own point of view while also bringing to the fore broader social-structural issues, such as for example social mobility and class-based inequality, racism and hate crime, as well as patriarchy and gender-based violence. Hence Critical criminologists have used victim narratives to explore issues such as rape (Bletzer and Koss, 2006), childhood sexual abuse (Staller and Nelson-Gardell, 2005) and domestic violence (Walklate, 2004). In addition to using offender’s narratives to explore the dehumanising nature of prison life (Morgan, 1999), the female experience of imprisonment (Peckham, 1985), life on death row (Sarat, 2001), why people reoffend (Nellis, 2002), organised crime (Warshow, 1970), drug trafficking (Ross and Richards, 2002), subcultures, drug use and dance music (Wilson, 2007) and youth gang membership (Venkatesh, 2008). Prison autobiographies provide a rich vein of stimulus to the criminological imagination as they search for insight into the causes of offending behaviour, how individuals cope with long-term imprisonment, as well as desistance from crime (Hoskison, 1998; Evans and Wallace, 2008).

Part of the attractiveness of the narrative biographical and life story approach for many criminologists is that it seeks to invert the traditional power relationship between the researcher and researched through requiring they take a back seat and allow a person to tell their own story in their own words in a free flowing manner. This reinforces the politicised nature of the criminological project (Chamberlain, 2013). While as the next section of this chapter discusses, this shift towards recognising the value of narrative and life story has arguably also contributed to a renewed emphasis within criminology on the trajectory of an offender’s criminal career during their life. The rest of this chapter examines the Life Course approach to the criminological study of crime.

### Box 8.2 Key summary points

- A key factor influencing the development of critical standpoints in criminology and the emphasis on the duality of structure has been the rejection of positivism and the emergence of postmodern sensibilities.
- Positivism is influential in Biological and Psychological forms of criminology. It adopts a philosophical stance of realism as it assumes there is an objective reality

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that exists independently to human beings and emphasises the need for a researcher to engage in systematic observation and experiment in a value-neutral and dispassionate manner in order to discover underlying causal laws of behaviour.

- In contrast to positivism, postmodernism is an intellectual movement which is anti-realist as it highlights the contingent nature of human knowledge, holding that accounts of the world are social constructions which do not exist independently of the social actor and the language they use to describe the world around them.
- The intellectual heritage of postmodernism lies in the traditions of idealist and relativist western philosophy. Due to its relativistic take on the nature of human knowledge the postmodernist anti-realist viewpoint accords equal validity to all perspectives and voices. This is congruent with Critical criminology perspectives as well as qualitative research methodologies, which has led to the development of an increasing focus within criminology over the last three decades on narrative and life story forms of qualitative research as part of a broader concern with the life course of offending behaviour.

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## LIFE COURSE CRIMINOLOGY

The development of Life Course criminology is not solely bound up with the postmodern narrative turn within Critical forms of criminology over the last three decades. Indeed, Life Course criminology has a long history in criminology. It arguably can trace its roots back to the early Chicago School discussed in Chapter 5, while it has developed utilising both qualitative and quantitative research methods, particularly in the USA. Certainly, the collection of longitudinal quantitative and qualitative data is one of the hallmarks of Life Course criminology given its focus on tracing over time the life trajectories and stories of criminals. It is also viewed as an integrated theory of crime in that it seeks to incorporate both developmental biological-psychological as well as social-psychological factors within its analysis of criminal careers, particularly the trajectory from youth delinquency to adult criminality (Wright et al., 2015). The Life Course perspective can best be conceptualised as viewing life events in the context of life stages, turning points and pathways, all of which are embedded in social institutions; specifically, the family, the school, the workplace, the penal system and so on (Pager, 2003). Its primary concern is with the fact that the majority of crime in western nations is committed by youth offenders between the ages of 16 and 25 and that desistance from crime as a person ages is common to all offenders regardless of any similarities or differences in their early childhood experiences (Young, 2011). The rest of the chapter will explore how Life Course criminologists have explored the interaction of these elements in the production of a criminal career by examining two influential theories: Moffitt's Dual Taxonomy (1993) and Sampson and Laub's Age Graded Stability and Change Model (1993).

### Moffitt's Dual Taxonomy

Life Course criminology begins with a simple axiom: that an adult criminal career by and large requires childhood antisocial behaviour yet not all antisocial

children become antisocial adults or offenders. It is exploring why this is the case, why the life trajectory of some young people and not others leads to an adult criminal career, which led Terri Moffitt (1993) to argue that the pattern of offending behaviour over time is characterised by stability or change. Moffitt argues that they are two groups of offenders and they need to be treated differently. The first group, which Moffitt calls life course persistent offenders, are repeat adult offenders who have exhibited a range of antisocial behaviours from a young age, including biting and hitting other children as toddlers, being disruptive in classrooms as young children, getting into drinks and drugs as adolescents, stealing and starting fights as teenagers, and finally, as adults committing crimes ranging from fraud to violence and sexual abuse. Moffitt (1993: 680) argues that 'if some individuals' antisocial behaviour is stable from pre-school to adulthood, then investigators are compelled to look for its roots early in life, in factors that are present before or soon after birth'. Moffitt argues that what she calls 'neuropsychological deficits' are key to understanding persistent antisocial and criminal behaviour throughout the life course. These are developmental psychological problems and disorders which affect an individual's ability to exert self-control over behavioural impulses and to consider the consequences of actions, and which have been associated as key risk factors in predicting antisocial and aggressive behaviours (Pager, 2003). In contrast to this group, whose antisocial and criminal behaviour is a relatively constant feature of their life course from youth to adulthood, Moffitt's second group, who she believes describes most young people, are those who are well behaved at a young age, but get into trouble during adolescence or their teenage years, but desist from such behaviour once they enter adulthood. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Moffitt calls these adolescent limited offenders. Moffitt explains that this group suffers from a tension during their teen years whereby adult behavioural rules – particularly in relation to sexual activity and the consumption of goods, alcohol and drugs – appear attractive to them. Indeed, informal social sanctions from peers and reference groups may encourage such behaviour even when formal socio-cultural rules clearly do not. This state of affairs leads some generally rule-abiding teenagers into episodic delinquent behaviour as an adaptive behaviour to cope with this tension and socially demonstrate their peer group memberships. Moffitt argues that as these youths transition into adulthood the need to transgress somewhat naturally diminishes. This certainly makes some sense. After all, a 15-year-old may well wish to emulate the behaviour of an 18-year-old, but by the time they reach their mid-twenties there is very little difference between their socially sanctioned behaviour and that of a 30- or 40-year-old.

At the heart of Moffitt's theory lies a biologically grounded developmental psychological model of criminal behaviour which holds that the life course of a small proportion of adult offenders demonstrates that the roots of their offending behaviour leads back not only into their childhood but the fact that they possess neuropsychological defects, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, which affect their ability to empathise with others, see the consequences of their actions and exert self-control over their behaviour. Research



does seem to indicate that a relationship exists between neuropsychological defects and persistent offending behaviour amongst men (Raine, 2005). However, this is dangerously close to stating that a distinct biological criminal type exists which separates these individuals from the larger youth offending group. This is a position which is somewhat at odds with the Critical criminologist standpoint regarding the politicised and value-laden nature of definitions surrounding what constitutes transgressive, deviant and criminal behaviour and what does not (Young, 2011). Furthermore, it is argued that Moffitt's developmental theory is arbitrary in its cut-off between youth and adulthood, and most importantly, does not adequately account for the importance of parental style, attachment and social bonds in influencing the development of a young person's ability to see the consequences of their action and exercise self-control (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1995).

### **Hirschi's Social Control Theory**

The social psychologist Travis Hirschi has been critical of Moffitt's theory and argued instead for the importance of social bonds when analysing youth delinquency and offending behaviour in his Social Control Theory (SCT) (Hirschi, 1969; Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1995). This asks the question 'why do people not break the law?' to which it replies 'because of social bonds'. In other words, SCT assumes that people are free to break the law in any number of ways but certain controls stop them. Hirschi (1969) argues that these controls are located in the social bonds which tie individuals together and engender law-abiding behaviour. He defines four types of bond, stating that 'elements of social bonding include attachment to families, commitment to social norms and institutions (school, employment), involvement in activities, and the belief that these things are important' (Hirschi, 1969: 16). Importantly, SCT hypothesises that the presence of these four social bonds helps to prevent criminal behaviour and encourage lawful behaviour. Each of the four bounds can be operationalised into variables against which it is possible to obtain empirical data. Hirschi (1969) provides empirical data from over 4000 informants between 12 and 17 years old. He operationalised and tested his four concepts – 'attachment', 'commitment', 'involvement' and 'beliefs' – and doing so showed that rule-breaking behaviour and delinquency did seem to occur in children from families with poor emotional ties between children and parents ('attachment'), when children felt they did not have much to lose from not meeting expectations surrounding participation in educational study ('commitment'), as well as perhaps did not invest much personal time and energy in organised social activities such as sports or other leisure pursuits ('involvement'), and finally, did not seem to have recognised the value of rules to regulate behaviour amongst people ('beliefs'). Since Hirschi's original formulation SCT has been subject to further empirical study and although by no means conclusive the evidence does seem to tentatively support the theory, although it has been criticised for its tendency

to focus on young male offenders (Chamberlain, 2013). However, SCT has been influential in Life Course criminology by providing the basis for the work of Sampson and Laub (1993), who in their critique of Moffitt (1993) extended the applicability of SCT to include adult offenders, as is discussed in the next section of the chapter.

### **Sampson and Laub's Age Graded Stability and Change Model**

SCT heavily influenced the work of Sampson and Laub (1990, 1993). They are critical of Moffitt's focus on either stability or change. Indeed, they argue that the life course of the offender is dynamic in that it consists of both elements. This is because they are concerned with the possibility of intervention to deter individuals from repeating criminal behaviours. For Sampson and Laub (1993) the key question is what factors affect the offending trajectory of individuals and they provide an answer with their age graded model of informal social control. They begin by expanding SCT to include adult behaviour and argue that having quality social interactions and bonds with others determines the impact and strength of informal social controls on an individual and so their willingness and ability to exercise self-control over their actions. That is, if the bonds are high quality and emotionally rewarding then self-control increases and antisocial and criminal behaviour lessens. The stronger the bond, the stronger the informal social control, which in turn increases an individual's potential to change and follow a non-criminal trajectory. Put simply, the weaker the social bonds the more likely there will be continuity in offending behaviour, while the stronger the social bonds the more likely a reduction in offending behaviour will occur.

Particular institutions of formal social control, such as school, employment and family, each change throughout the life course in their ability to affect an individual's behaviour due to the formal and informal social bonding opportunities they provide (Sampson and Laub, 1990). Indeed, it is suggested that the ability of certain institutions to control criminal or conforming behaviour is dependent on age graded variability as an individual moves from youth into adulthood. In other words, their impact in deterring antisocial and criminal behaviour is in flux and changes over time and is dynamic rather than continuous. Therefore, although delinquent and criminal behaviour can and does often exist with much continuity from youth into adulthood, Sampson and Laub (1993) assert that social bonds in adulthood (including school, family, peers and community relations) can explain change and why offending behaviour often ends as a young person enters adult life, with specific life events within the trajectory of a life course influencing behaviour. A meaningful shift in bonds created by, for example, achieving for the first time academic or sporting success at school, getting that first job, meeting a life partner, getting married and becoming a parent, are common key turning points and transitions in the life course, and so can redirect an individual's criminal pathway. As a result,

Sampson and Laub argue for the need for criminologists to engage with mixed-method quantitative and qualitative longitudinal research in order to explore what effect the varying ties to particular institutions at different stages in the life course have on the capacity to modify criminal trajectories (Sampson and Laub, 1993).

### **Targeted Life Course interventions**

The age graded model makes sense as evidence does suggest that during the early years family relationships are important in shaping behaviour; however as children grow direct parental impact diminishes and peer groups and social institutions such as schools become more important, while in adulthood schools and parents both take a backseat to jobs and spouses as primary mechanisms for social control (Wright et al., 2015). The research of Sampson and Laub (1993) does allow for a rethink in terms of crime prevention policy. For example, school-based interventions to deter and address antisocial behaviour and youth delinquency prior to formal involvement in the criminal justice system have been advocated to increase social bonds and reinforce trajectories away from a criminal career. This could be achieved by changing educational environments and working cultures to reduce the negative labelling and stigmatisation of young people, better tailored job training to individual needs, wider sporting and extra-curricular activities, as well as providing counselling, relationship advice and sexual health services (Benson, 2013).

In relation to the criminal justice system, the situation is undoubtedly more complex. Most prolific young offenders possess a range of problems and issues which make it difficult to prescribe a one-size-fits-all approach to the problem of youth crime: including trauma and aggressive behaviour resulting from being a victim of childhood neglect or physical or sexual abuse; a lack of opportunity and social mobility; substance and alcohol abuse problems; high levels of disengagement from educational pathways; poor communication and life skills; dysfunctional family relationships; a lack of positive male and female role models; a distrust of authority figures; and finally, feelings of isolation and social exclusion (Millie et al., 2005). For Andrews and Andrews (2003) repeated experience shows that the complex needs of young offenders mean that targeting social bonding activities, such as sports and athletics, must be embedded within professionally-led counselling, mentoring, life skills training and educational programmes, to support young people to change their offending behaviour and connect with a pathway to work.

However, such approaches to dealing with antisocial, delinquent and criminal behaviour – be they located in the school or the prison – are often at odds with the broader, more punitive Right Realist youth crime agenda which has dominated western societies over the last 30 years or so, with the result that we have seen an increase in juvenile punishment and incarceration rates worldwide (Young, 2011). Nevertheless, for its proponents, Life Course criminology offers

realistic and humanistic opportunities for developing crime prevention policy, with interventions being targeted to suit need at particular key points in the life course (i.e. on release from prison), and its influence on criminal justice practitioners, particularly those who work with youth offenders, is undoubtedly growing (Benson, 2013). This is not least because the emphasis of Life Course criminology on collecting statistical and life story data to trace the impact of significant life events and social bonds on offending behaviour by and large chimes with practitioners' day-to-day professional experience of 'what works' when working with offenders to achieve lasting positive change in their lives.

### Box 8.3 Key summary points

- Life Course criminology focuses on tracing over time the life trajectories and stories of criminals. It is also viewed as an integrated theory of crime in that it seeks to incorporate both developmental biological-psychological as well as social-psychological factors within its analysis of criminal careers, particularly the trajectory from youth delinquency to adult criminality.
- The Life Course perspective can best be conceptualised as viewing life events in the context of life stages, turning points and pathways, all of which are embedded in social institutions – specifically, the family, the school, the workplace, the penal system and so on. Its primary concern is with the fact that the majority of crime in western nations is committed by youth offenders between the ages of 16 and 25 and that desistance from crime as a person ages is common to all offenders regardless of any similarities or differences in their early childhood experiences.
- Two influential Life Course criminological theories are Moffitt's Dual Taxonomy (1993) and Sampson and Laub's Age Graded Stability and Change Model (1993).
- At the centre of Moffitt's (1993) theory lies a biologically grounded developmental psychological model of criminal behaviour which holds that the life course of a small proportion of adult offenders demonstrates that the roots of their offending behaviour lead back not only to their childhood but the fact that they possess neuropsychological defects, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, which affect their ability to empathise with others, see the consequences of their actions and exert self-control over their behaviour. Research does seem to indicate that a relationship exists between neuropsychological defects and persistent offending behaviour amongst men (Raine, 2005). However, the eminent social psychologist Travis Hirschi has been critical of Moffitt's theory and argued instead for the importance of social bonds when analysing youth delinquency and offending behaviour in his Social Control Theory (SCT) (Hirschi, 1969).
- Sampson and Laub (1990, 1993) emphasise social bonds and note that particular institutions of formal social control, such as school, employment and family, each change throughout the life course in their ability to affect an individual's behaviour due to the formal and informal social bonding opportunities they provide. Sampson and Laub argue for the need to engage with mixed-method quantitative and qualitative longitudinal research in order to explore

what effect the varying ties to particular institutions at different stages in the life course have on the capacity to modify criminal trajectories. The resulting research does suggest that during the early years family relationships are important in shaping behaviour, however as children grow direct parental impact lessens and peer groups and social institutions such as schools become more important, while in adulthood schools and parents both take a backseat to jobs and spouses as primary mechanisms for social control.

- Life Course criminology is growing in popularity amongst both academics and criminal justice practitioners. Some Critical criminologists have highlighted that this approach is often at odds with the more punitive Right Realist youth crime agenda of most western societies for the last three decades, which has seen an increase in juvenile punishment and incarceration rates worldwide.

### Further reading

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- Sampson, RJ and Laub, JH (1993) *Crime in the making: pathways and turning points through life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
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## SELF-STUDY TASK

Write a maximum of 750 words outlining the emergence of Life Course criminology over the last three decades as well as why the concepts of stability, change, social bonds and turning points are important to understanding why not all antisocial and delinquent youths become adult offenders.