

TO: Students in CJ 406

FROM: R. B. Taylor

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RE: (1) More thoughts on S&L / L&S (2) Using Farrington to get beyond Sampson and Laub / Laub and Sampson on Life Course Theories

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NOTE. In line with your recent concern about separating the forest from the trees, **the important stuff about the forest is in bold.**

Laub and Sampson present one view of life course criminology. It builds on Sampson and Laub (1993).<sup>1</sup> **S&L is basically an age graded informal social control model.**

**S&L = ISC / Time**

**L&S provide an expanded version of the earlier S&L version. The more recent volume adds more: lack (or regaining) of social controls; routine activities, and “purposeful human agency.”**  
**In short:**

**L&S = [ ISC + SC + RA + HA ] / Time**

There are other major models of life course criminology. There are some general differences between them, and some important questions relevant to them.

1. Remember, none of these theories is about the differences between offenders and non-offenders. This sounds like a stupid point, but you would do well to remember it. **All of these theories seek to differentiate between those who are already doing some type of delinquency or crime.**
2. One of the main meta-differences between these theories is in how they see how life intersects with crime (or delinquency) over time: is it ballistic, like an ICBM – launch it and watch it go – or is it like a pinball in a pinball machine, bouncing away from bumpers, kickers, and slingshots?
3. **Relatedly, as L&S point out there is an implicit prospective predictability notion inherent in both developmental models and in the “career” perspective.** Although Farrington merges together career and developmental and life course orientations, there are key differences in implicit if not explicit assumptions. “Early life predictors are the hallmark of career approaches.”
4. If you were to look at a traditional criminological “theories” course at a place like say, West Chester, you would find the traditional “buckets” -- biological, psychological, sociological – for the different theories. **But life course theories fit into none of these buckets.** Rather they place individuals with certain advantages and deficits in particular historical circumstances

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<sup>1</sup> Sampson, R., & Laub, J. (1993). *Crime in the making: Pathways and turning points through life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

with particular families and friends and institutions around them. Sampson in an earlier piece called this **dynamic contextualism**.<sup>2</sup> These life course models are really really different.

5. **Really, really key is the question of: is everyone the same (G&H), or is everyone different (Nagin; Moffitt). Latent class models find different “groups” of offenders who are following different “trajectories.” These are the latest Next Big Thing, being pushed by Nagin, Bushway and others. These assume that people somehow “join” others who are following a similar trajectory, and that different groups join different trajectories. But are these groups? Or are they just statistical artifacts, and is treating them like groups committing the reification fallacy (see handout from first day, see L&S: 103-113)? This is huge – you need to have an opinion about this.**
6. Ask yourself: are these theories parsimonious?
7. **Ask yourself: do these theories predict or describe?** If you are saying they predict, then over what period do they offer good prediction – how many days or months or years in advance?

Farrington in his 2002 Sutherland Award paper lists five life course / developmental/career models: Sampson and Laub, Moffitt, Thornberry and Krohn, LeBlanc, Catalano and Hawkins, and his own anti-social potential (ICAP) theory.<sup>3</sup> ***I strongly recommend that you review what Farrington says in his article about each of these theories.*** It gives an excellent overview of these five theories, as well as detail on his own theory. It makes for a good starting template for each of these five theories. *You need to know in some detail about how 2-3 of these theories actually work.*

Farrington describes the ways these theories differ by pointing out how they answer certain questions. His perspective is described below.

But in addition to these questions and thoughts, there are additional more general points as well.

#### What is it?

Farrington treats developmental and life course criminology as the same, and uses the term DLC. He suggests (see quote immediately below) that it was both a reaction to research on criminal careers and a view that the latter was a-theoretical. Confusingly, however, the DLC is still built on criminal career research.

**The whole concept of criminal career is itself highly controversial.** Although researchers have agreed on what the main parameters of interest in criminal careers (onset, lambda, diversity, desistance, termination), there are important un-answered questions about what ways crime is and is not a career. In addition, as noted above, there are questions about whether a life of crime is a rocket or a pinball.

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<sup>2</sup> Sampson, R. (1993). Linking time and place: dynamic contextualism and the future of criminological inquiry. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 30, 426-444.

<sup>3</sup> Farrington, D. P. (2003). Developmental and life-course criminology: Key theoretical and empirical issues - The 2002 Sutherland Award Address. *Criminology*, 41(2), 221-255.

Developmental and life-course criminology (DLC) is concerned with three main issues: the development of offending and antisocial behavior, risk factors at different ages, and the effects of life events on the course of development. DLC is especially concerned with documenting and explaining within-individual changes in offending throughout life. It is a further elaboration of the criminal career paradigm that became very prominent in the 1980s (Blumstein et al., 1986) by adding in the study of risk factors and life events. This paradigm enormously advanced knowl-

some extent, the DLC theories were a reaction to what was perceived as a largely atheoretical criminal career paradigm.

#### What is the scope?

Laub and Sampson is built on 500 males, with more information from about 50 of them. The evidentiary basis for many of these theories is pretty limited, as Farrington acknowledges. The basis is:

“Lower class urban males in Western industrialized societies in the past 80 years or so. How far they apply to other types of persons ... or offenses” are not known.

#### What must be explained?

Farrington says first that there are some things the theory needs to be able to explain:

“ten widely accepted conclusions about the development of offending that any DLC theory must be able to explain”

1. “Prevalence of offending peaks in the late teenage years”
2. “Peak age of onset of offending is between 8 and 14 ... peak age of desistance ... is between 20 and 29”
3. Early onset predicts a long criminal career duration.
4. “There is marked continuity in offending and antisocial behavior from childhood to the teenage years and adulthood ... people who commit relatively many offenses during one age range have a high probability of also committing relatively many offenses during another age range.. between individual stability in antisocial ordering is completely compatible with within-individual change in behavior over time.”
5. Chronic offenders commit large fraction of all crimes.
6. “Offending is versatile [general?] rather than specialized.”
7. Offending behavior usually linked to larger antisocial behavior syndrome (“heavy drinking, reckless driving, sexual promiscuity, bullying, and truancy”).
8. “Most offenses up to the late teenage years are committed with others” and from 20 onward, usually alone.
9. Variable reasons for giving up offending in late teenage years; “from age 20 onwards utilitarian motives become increasingly dominant.”

10. Different types of offenses first committed in a recognized ordering (shoplifting before burglary before robbery)

He then further suggests any DLC theory needs to try and address some key questions:

1. Although prevalence “peaks in the late teenage years, it is far less clear how the individual offending frequency ... varies with age.”
2. How does seriousness change with age?
3. Does early onset predict high lambda or high seriousness?
4. DO chronic offenders commit more serious offenses than non-chronic; more generally, are the chronics “different” in some key ways?
5. Are onset sequences across offense types “merely age-appropriate behavioral manifestations of some underlying theoretical construct [LSC?] ... or if the onset of one type of behavior facilitates or acts as a stepping stone toward the onset of another.” Do onset sequences reflect “persistent heterogeneity or state dependence?”
6. Do risk factors have causal effects on offending? “Within-individual variations are more relevant to the concept of cause as well as to DLC”
7. Risk factors could be causes, or alternate indicators of broader, underlying construct [LSC?] OR both. Heavy drinking example. Causes between person differences, also within-person differences.
8. DLC theories seem to generally overlook the impacts of interventions.

Later in the article he modifies both of these lists and repeats them in a more summary fashion:

The key empirical issues that need to be addressed by any DLC theory are as follows:

1. Why do people start offending?
2. How are onset sequences explained?
3. Why is there continuity in offending from adolescence to adulthood?
4. Why do people stop offending?
5. Why does prevalence peak in the teenage years?
6. Why does an early onset predict a long criminal career?
7. Why is there versatility in offending and antisocial behavior?
8. Why does co-offending decrease from adolescence to adulthood?
9. Why are there between-individual differences in offending?
10. What are the key risk factors for onset and desistance, and how can they be explained?

11. Why are there within-individual differences in offending?
  - (a) long term (over life)
  - (b) short term (over time and place)
12. What are the main motives and reasons for offending?
13. What are the effects of life events on offending?

The key theoretical issues that need to be addressed in any DLC theory are as follows:

1. What is the key construct underlying offending?
2. What factors encourage offending?
3. What factors inhibit offending?
4. Is there a learning process?
5. Is there a decision-making process?
6. What is the structure of the theory?
7. What are operational definitions of theoretical constructs?
8. What does the theory explain?
9. What does the theory not explain?
10. What findings might challenge the theory? (Can the theory be tested?)
11. Crucial tests: How much does the theory make different predictions from another theory?

#### Comment on risk factors

The empirical research and even more importantly the policy support and funding for a risk factors and protective factors approach is huge. Catalano and Hawkins (see below) have developed a model that has been adopted wholesale by communities as their prevention approach. L&S themselves raise some important questions about this approach. But Farrington points out some key questions about these factors.

There are many other unresolved issues concerning risk factors for offending. We know a great deal about family risk factors (especially) and individual risk factors, but far less about biological, peer, school, or neighborhood risk factors. Little is known about risk factors for continuation of offending after onset, for later onsets after age 20, or for persistence or desistance of offending after age 20. Little is known about risk factors for the duration of criminal careers. Little is known about the causal processes that intervene between risk factors and offending. And little is known about protective factors, whether defined as factors that are opposite to risk factors (e.g., high school achievement compared with low school achievement) or as factors that interact with and counteract the effects of risk factors (Losel and Bender, 2003).

### Comment on G&H

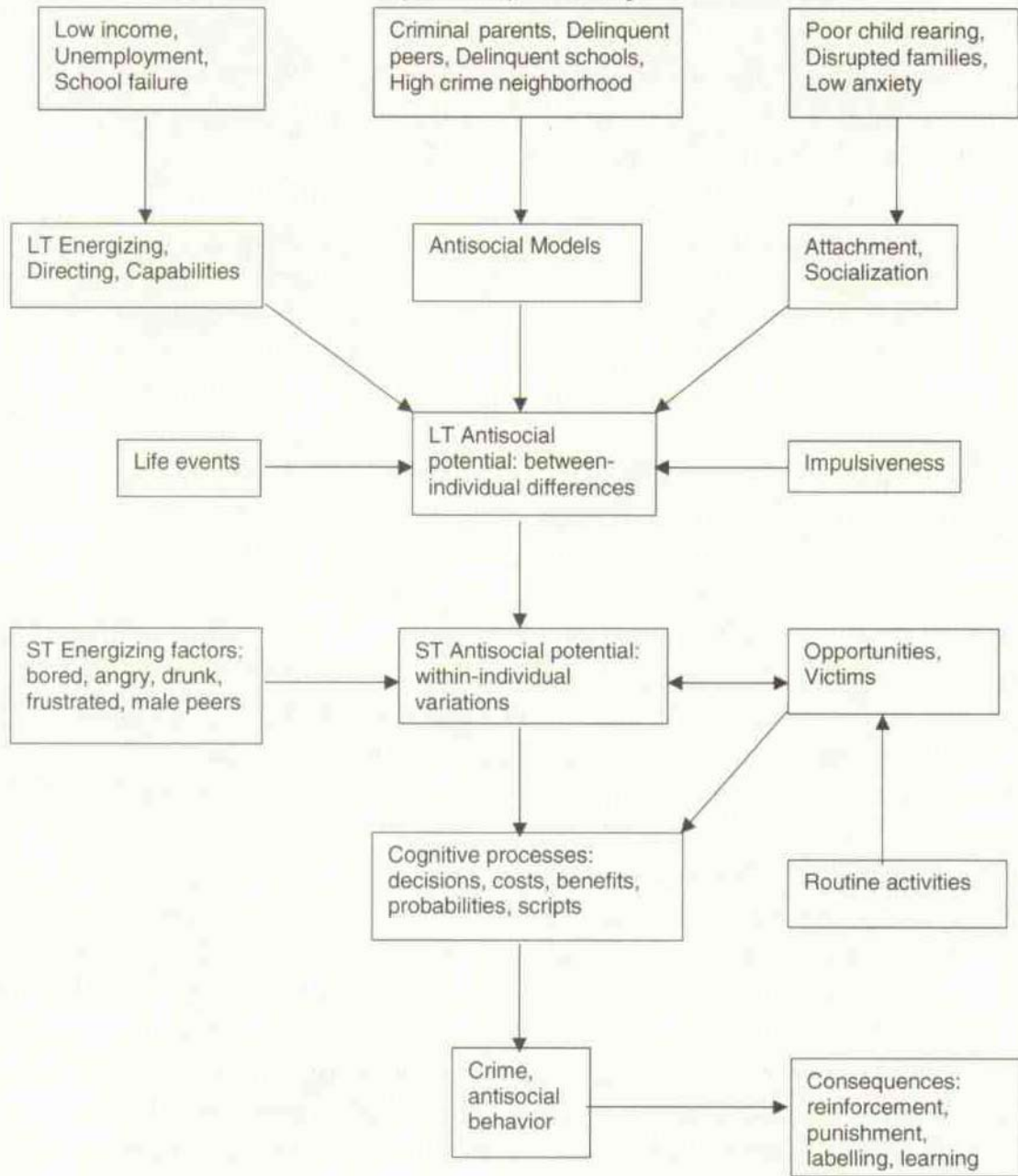
Farrington also comments on the G&H model, at one point calling their model “anti-developmental.”

Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) argue that it is unnecessary to investigate why people start, continue, or stop offending, because all criminal career parameters reflect their underlying theoretical construct of self-control. Hence, the predictors and correlates of onset, continuation, frequency, seriousness, and desistance are the same. They also argue that, because the age-crime curve is universal in all places and times, it essentially reflects universal biological processes associated with ageing (e.g., maturational reform in the 20s). Therefore, life events such as getting married and getting a satisfying job have no effect on offending, and events following the commission of a crime (e.g., reinforcement or stigmatization) do not change the propensity to commit crimes in the future. They argue that offending is essentially a rational decision and that whether people commit offenses depends on opportunities and routine activities. All of these issues will be addressed later in discussing DLC theories.

### Farrington’s own model

His model is an age-graded theory, and bears a not unfamiliar resemblance to some of his earlier age-graded theories.

**FIGURE 1:**  
**The Integrated Cognitive Antisocial Potential (ICAP) Theory**



Note: LT = Long-Term  
 ST = Short-Term

### Some closing thoughts

1. **Any one of these models is difficult to test in its entirety.** One volume that perhaps comes closest is Sampson and Laub's work.<sup>4</sup> But it uses the same data source (Glueck & Glueck) that Laub and Sampson use. It is unlikely such a test can be replicated with another data set. Other researchers – Thornberry, Loeber, others – have developed their own longitudinal data sets over time. But none of these was started in the 1950s.
2. **Some of this DLC work – but not all – seems to have an incomplete view on what is important from a psychological perspective.** IMHO, maybe the person is under-conceptualized. Although many of the theories often rely on some key findings and theory in psychology (e.g., social learning theory, operant learning theory, “neuropsychological deficits” and the like), there are other core issues in personality psychology (the Five Factor Model, the development of empathy, stages of moral reasoning) and developmental psychology (first two year attachment issues, Piaget and moral and cognitive development) that seem to get overlooked. Work in social psychology on group functioning, particularly important for delinquency, seems to get overlooked. **Stated differently, how well grounded and how successful can models be about individual differences among children, teens, and young adults, and about those changes, when core issues get overlooked?**

Of course, as L&S themselves mention, they themselves are anti-developmental in some ways, because, in their view, developmental approaches imply an unavoidable “unfolding.” I think they are being too dismissive. Yes, it is important to preserve autonomy, but it is still true that concrete cognitive operations kick in before abstract cognitive operations.

L&S might argue that they do not overlook personality. Their analysis in Ch. 5 incorporates child or teen “traits.” Whether these are sufficient or not from a personality theorist's point of view is another question. They certainly do not have personality traits over time.

Maybe this is asking too much, because to tap into these developmental concerns much broader data sources would be needed. There are studies just starting to come out of the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods which have detailed child and neighborhood data.<sup>5</sup> This is a step in the right direction. But I think a truly comprehensive model with adequate data is pretty unlikely.

3. Given that, I think it is pretty unlikely that anyone is going to be able to find a common data set against which they can benchmark these different theories. No one will every know which of these theories is better.
4. **Biological reductionism is a constant worry in this field of research.** Terms such as “neuropsychological deficits” suggest we can tell future offenders just by analyzing their MRI results. Yes, there are certain physiological correlates of aggressive behavior in children. But that does not mean you can predict future murderers from these correlates.
5. One of the persistent and common mis-understandings in this field, at least as it is mis-understood by the public, is a failure to truly appreciate what it means for a theory to be age-

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<sup>4</sup> Sampson, R., & Laub, J. (1993). *Crime in the making: Pathways and turning points through life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

<sup>5</sup> For example: Xue, Y. G., Leventhal, T., Brooks-Gunn, J., & Earls, F. J. (2005). Neighborhood residence and mental health problems of 5-to 11-year-olds. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 62(5), 554-563.

graded. **What happens now is dependent heavily on what happened a little while ago. What happened then was dependent on what happened before then. Can you trace the chain from now to way back then? Yes. But there are so many intervening steps that the path in its entirety cannot be predicted.** Just because you enroll your 2 year old in a super academic day care program does not mean she is going to Harvard. Next year, because everybody is developing, others will be catching up. You will need to accelerate her the next year and the next year and the next.... until she is burned out. Similarly for prevention programs. There is no one magic preventive program administered at age X, that ensures young Johnny will never become an armed robber. Prevention, in whatever form it is needed, must be continuous. Programs cannot provide this. Families and institutions can.<sup>6</sup> This is the main message of Frank Furstenberg's longitudinal study of West Philadelphia youth, contrasting high risk youth who stayed out of trouble with those who did not. Development is happening all the time. Life is happening all the time.

Some key terms from L&S

**Onset**

**Participation**

**Incidence**

**Career length**

**Desistance (vs. de escalation) vs. termination**

**Person vs. variable centered**

**Pathway**

**Persistent offender**

Asymmetrical causation

**Propensity**

Population heterogeneity (kinds of people) vs. state dependence (kinds of contexts)

**Maturation**

Developmental accounts

**LCPOs vs. ALOs**

Aleatory element

**Turning point**

**Knifing off**

Bridging environment

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<sup>6</sup> Furstenberg, F. F. (1999). *Managing to make it: Urban families and adolescent success*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.