



The contributions of an interactionist approach to research and theory on criminal careers

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Abstract

The term 'criminal career' is treated in different ways by two distinct approaches, with differing ontological assumptions about human social behavior—a positivist approach and a pragmatist/symbolic interactionist approach. Our major argument is that those interested in criminal careers and in stability and change in 'criminal propensity' have much to gain by attending to symbolic interactionist conceptions of careers in crime and deviance, which are based on pragmatist rather than positivist ontological assumptions. These symbolic interactionist conceptions of criminal careers emphasize that continuity and change are inseparable, and that social constraints and opportunities, socialization, and even biology may influence, but never totally determine the contingencies and choices involved in criminal activity throughout the life course. Such symbolic interactionist conceptions would therefore provide those interested in both quantitative and qualitative research on criminal careers with a theoretical framework that makes sense of individual level indeterminacy, and stability and change in criminal activity over the life course.

Key Words

crime • criminal careers • criminology • deviance • interactionism

Introduction

The concept of careers in crime and deviance has proved very useful in criminology for several decades. However, the term 'criminal career' is treated in different ways by two distinct approaches, with two different sets of ontological assumptions about human social behavior—a positivist approach (e.g. Blumstein et al., 1985, 1986, 1988) and a pragmatist/symbolic interactionist approach (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963; Adler and Adler, 1983; Best and Luckenbill, 1994).

Though contemporary positivist criminal careers literature recognizes the practical and methodological limits to predicting individual criminal career trajectories, there is insufficient recognition that these limits are not just of methodological importance but also of theoretical importance (for exceptions, see Gottfredson and Gottfredson, 1994; Maltz, 1994). We argue that symbolic interactionist conceptualizations of criminal careers, with their pragmatist ontological assumptions, offer much theoretical insight on indeterminacy in criminal careers, the dynamics of career phases and the notion of stability in criminal propensity, and the role of quantitative and qualitative methods in the study of criminal careers. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes dialectics of continuity and change, and decisions and processes within situational opportunities and constraints which, in turn, are conditioned by social structural contexts. It posits that social constraints and opportunities, socialization, and even biology may influence, but never totally determine the contingencies and choices involved in criminal activity throughout the life course. Symbolic interactionism would therefore provide those using quantitative and qualitative research on both criminal careers and stable criminal propensities a theoretical framework that makes sense of individual level indeterminacy, stability, and patterned change in criminal activity over the life course.

In what follows we first review various recent directions in the positivist criminal career literature, including debates about its policy implications, the notion of stable criminal propensities, and methodological issues; and second, compare and contrast the ontological assumptions underlying symbolic interactionist approaches and positivist approaches to criminal careers, and review key exemplars of interactionist research on careers in crime and deviance. We conclude by outlining several ways in which an interactionist approach can contribute even more to research and theory on criminal careers, and briefly noting some policy implications of such an approach.

Positivistic conceptions of criminal careers

The positivist approach emphasizes the predictive modeling of the characteristics of criminal careers, such as onset, duration, frequency of offending, and exit. The approach has its roots in the research on crime in New York

City by Avi-Itzhak and Shinnar (1973), who were trained in engineering and emphasized the importance of formal mathematical models for predicting criminal behavior. This approach, refined and expanded by Petersilia (1980) and Blumstein et al. (1986, 1988), defines criminal careers as ‘the longitudinal sequence of offenses committed by an offender who has a detectable rate of offending during some period of time’ (Blumstein et al., 1988: 2). Further, ‘criminal careers are characterized during a lifetime by a beginning (onset or initiation), an end (dropout or termination), a duration (career length), and a frequency of offending (λ)’ (p. 2). Farrington (1987: 59) also points out that ‘the criminal career approach has the great advantage of quantification.’ Thus, this definition of criminal careers is couched in terms of sequences of discrete events to be quantitatively measured and predicted through statistical techniques.

Positivist criminal careers research addresses how offender characteristics, social environmental factors, and (in some studies) criminal justice interventions can predict onset, frequency, persistence, and exit from criminal activity over time. One of the most important tenets of this approach is that these different phases of criminal careers are potentially generated by distinct causal factors. In noting the practical importance of distinguishing between different aspects or phases of criminal careers, Blumstein et al. state:

If offending is widespread throughout the population (high participation), with a large number of offenders committing crimes at low frequencies, participation is an appropriate target for crime control. If, however, participation in crime is low and individual offending frequencies are high, then policies directed at high λ offenders may be more suitable.

(1988: 7)

Of particular interest is the identification of that small but troublesome proportion of ‘persistent offenders’ first identified in the cohort studies of Wolfgang and associates (see Wolfgang, 1958; Wolfgang et al., 1972, 1987). The famous longitudinal criminal careers studies by Blumstein and associates (Blumstein et al., 1985, 1986, 1988) exemplify this approach, and focus on identifying types of criminal careers and examining their distinct trajectories and determinants.

Positivist criminal careers research incorporates the logic of ‘soft positivism’ (see Blalock, 1989; Collins, 1989) and a probabilistic determinism, as used in stochastic statistical methods. The various kinds of statistical models found in the criminal careers literature exemplify this soft positivist logic: researchers attempt to predict events of criminal offending with varying degrees of error. This approach therefore recognizes that measurements are not isomorphic with reality due to measurement error, insufficiently complete data, model misspecification, and other measurement and modeling limitations (see Hanushek and Jackson, 1977: 12). Hence, there is a distinction in quantitative models of criminal careers between the ‘true’ and ‘observed’ values of parameters, or ‘true’ versus ‘specified’ causal

models. For example, Farrington (1987: 59) distinguishes between 'true' and 'observed' individual crime rates: 'The actual number of offenses is related probabilistically to the recorded number because of measurement biases . . . The major problem is to draw conclusions from measured rates about the true rate of offending.'

Sophisticated statistical modeling has been the methodological hallmark of both the Blumstein et al. (1986, 1988) criminal careers approach and the stable criminal propensity critique (discussed later). In their review of statistical techniques for modeling criminal careers, Osgood and Rowe (1994: 527) explain that determinism is probabilistic due to an indeterminate relation between 'the measured outcome and an underlying causal dimension.' Thus, they argue, probabilistic determinism must suffice in explaining and predicting criminal events over time since underlying causal variables may be unobservable (latent), and since observation and measurement are likely to be insufficiently precise (see also Rowe et al., 1990).

Specifically, positivist treatments of criminal careers tend to depict prediction error as a problem of insufficiently valid and reliable measurements, inappropriate modeling techniques, incompletely specified models, or all three. Thus, Gottfredson and Gottfredson (1986: 272–4) call for improvements in statistical prediction tools in criminal careers research, including improved reliability, validity of measurements, and modeling techniques, statistical bootstrapping, and better links between theory and model specification—most of which center on methodological/measurement issues. In addition, Blumstein et al. (1986: 114) state: 'In short, most of the evaluative research on preventative interventions is nondefinitive because of design problems, small sample sizes, inadequate follow-up periods, and inadequate randomization.' Further, Chaiken et al.'s (1993: 226–8) discussion of sources of error in predicting violence focuses solely on measurement issues, and states: 'by refining instruments that help assess violent persons probabilistically along several dimensions, behavioral and medical scientists can help shape practices that consider a variety of options for dealing with violent persons rather than a simple choice of two alternatives' (p. 284).

Criminal careers research and criminal justice policy

A lively debate has occurred within the criminal careers literature on the role of predictive criminal careers research in crime policy. Some are very hopeful about its contribution to crime control. Behavioral prediction is, after all, a principal activity of the criminal justice system. Gottfredson and Gottfredson (1986, 1994) argue that criminal justice decision makers will predict the future behavior of offenders with or without the assistance of scientific research, and that society is better served by basing such predictions on the best data and research available. The language, findings, and assumptions of the positivist criminal careers literature suffuse the crime

policy arena (Visher, 1995). Osgood and Rowe describe the uses of this research for crime policy:

This approach has generated findings in the form of projections of rates of offending, probabilities of desistance, and so forth, and often the projections are specific to instances, such as individuals recently convicted of a felony. Results in this form have proved useful for addressing policy issues, such as selective incapacitation, targeting prevention efforts, and sentencing strategies. As a result, the criminal career approach has been influential in the public policy arena.

(1994: 519)

Individual level prediction has been central to discussions of selective incapacitation as part of what Feeley and Simon (1992: 458) call the 'new penology': 'Its objectives are to identify high-risk offenders and to maintain long term control over them while investing in shorter terms and less intrusive control over lower risk offenders' because of the need to allocate scarce correctional resources and manage offender populations. Some have hoped that prediction-oriented criminal careers research can contribute to the development of such proactive, predictive crime control policies.¹ Thus, Visher reviews criminal career research, its future, and what it offers criminal justice policy:

the success of this strategy [classifying and targeting offenders] depends on the ability of the criminal justice system to identify career offenders accurately and early in their criminal careers. Better information needs to be gathered and made available to the criminal justice officials who arrest, prosecute, and sentence these offenders . . . A multifaceted approach to crime control that reserves incapacitation for career offenders or for those offenders convicted of truly heinous crimes and expands the use of intermediate sanctions with other types of offenders is likely to be the most effective crime control strategy for the 1990s.

(1995: 532–3)

Moreover, Farrington argues for empirical prediction-based criminal justice decision making with a medical-model analogy:

Many illnesses can more easily and effectively be prevented than cured. One method of preventing the spread of diseases is through quarantine. This clearly involves some costs to the individual who is isolated. However, it is felt that the benefits to the community of preventing diseases outweigh the costs to the individual of being quarantined.

(1987: 89)

Chaiken et al. (1993: 229) argue that empirical correlations of violent behavior, even if they do not directly implicate causal processes, are useful for predicting behavior and classifying offenders: 'The absence of proved causal relationships does not mean that these correlates are useless for classifying and predicting violent behavior . . . noncausal correlates can provide bases for meaningful utilitarian classification and prediction.'²

The predictive limitations of criminal careers models are by now widely acknowledged by those involved in such research. Many of the prediction models in the criminal careers studies discussed above are 'wrong' (either predicting false positives or false negatives) 30 to 67 percent of the time (e.g. Blumstein et al., 1986; Farrington, 1987; Chaiken et al., 1993; Gottfredson and Gottfredson, 1994; see also review by Barnett et al., 1992). Such levels of prediction error are not surprising, and are not in themselves grounds for damning criticism. After all, positivist research on criminal careers, in general, does no worse at predicting behavior than research elsewhere in social science. The 'false positives' problem—when 'high risk' individuals are predicted to become criminal offenders or recidivists, but in fact do not—is an important and enduring one in the prediction and intervention in criminal careers (Moore, 1986; Farrington, 1987; Agnew, 1995a).

In his commentary on ethical issues that accompanies the Blumstein et al. (1986) volumes, Moore (1986) locates debates about predictive intervention—and the attendant problem of false positive predictions—within the distinction between deontological versus utilitarian ethical systems. While he cautions against a 'technocratic enthusiasm for prediction' (p. 352), he argues that a sharp distinction between these two ethical systems in terms of criminal justice policy is 'unfortunate' (p. 321). He notes the utilitarian argument that the key goal of the criminal justice system is to reduce crime and promote public security, and states:

In this utilitarian conception the concern about punishing people for predicted future offenses disappears entirely—unless the means seem so grossly unjust and so bizarre as to be repugnant to the community. Similarly, the concern for 'false positives' fades, but does not entirely disappear.

(1986: 327, see also p. 321)

He goes on to advocate the further development of research-based predictive tests to identify small and distinctive groups of offenders, and argues that interventions targeted at these offenders would be acceptable if they stressed prior record.

Farrington (1987: 92) argues that false positive predictions, in and of themselves, need not prevent the utilitarian use of research-based predictive information in crime control policy, provided there is adequate consideration of the social costs and benefits of incorrect predictions, both of which, he suggests, should be quantified and weighed explicitly:

experience suggests that few well-designed prediction exercises will manage to keep both false positive and false negative rates below 50 percent. However, this need not necessarily prevent the use of prediction scores in criminal justice decision making . . . what matters is not the absolute false positive rate but the predictive efficiency of the score.

(1987: 95)

He thus ties future individual level interventions such as selective incapacitation to future advances in criminal careers research methodology aimed at prospectively predicting persistent offenders.

However, other proponents of positivist criminal careers research remain more cautious—even skeptical—about applying predictive-based findings to the development of policies that try to predict and control the criminal career trajectories of individuals. As Blumstein et al. state:

We are not uncritical enthusiasts of the concepts of career criminals and selective incapacitation, but we do believe that these policy ideas can stimulate important research. The outcome of the debate over these policies, however, has little relevance for the value of research on criminal careers, the participation/frequency distinction, or the longitudinal method, all of which rest on theoretical, methodological and other scholarly considerations.

(1988: 32)

In addition, Gottfredson and Gottfredson (1994: 466) argue that ‘the prediction of offenders’ behavior is difficult, and we don’t do it very well.’ They also note that the only way to reduce the number of prediction errors is to develop more accurate prediction tools, and that perfect prediction is unrealistic due to existing measurement and methodological problems (pp. 467–8). Further, the same criminogenic conditions can produce different responses, and individuals’ interpretations of, and responses to, conditions can also vary throughout the life course (Sampson and Laub, 1993; Maltz, 1994).

Critiques and extensions of criminal careers research

We wish to highlight three recent and important developments in the literature on positivist criminal careers research. The first two raise issues for stability and change in criminal behavior over time; the third has ontological implications for indeterminacy.

First, some scholars have noted that the criminal careers research of the 1970s and 1980s was unable theoretically to explain why different phases of criminal careers might exhibit distinct causal processes (see Tittle, 1988; Osgood and Rowe, 1994; Paternoster and Brame, 1997). In response, others have developed theories that combine the Blumstein et al. criminal careers framework with insights from life course and developmental research to explain differential patterns of earlier and later onset and desistance from crime (Moffitt, 1993; Patterson and Yoerger, 1993; see also Osgood and Rowe, 1994: 519; Paternoster and Brame, 1997: 51). As Nagin et al. summarize:

To varying degrees these theories emphasize some combination of the following arguments: The progression or trajectory of offending across ages will differ among individuals; the determinants of antisocial behavior are age graded and vary over the life course; antisocial behaviors themselves are

sequenced; and time-stable individual differences have an enduring impact on antisocial behavior.

(1995: 111)

Developmental and life-course perspectives offer useful theoretical extensions of criminal careers research. These perspectives take note of both the stability (persistence) and dynamic changes (onset and desistance) in offending during a person's life (Thornberry, 1995). Many of these perspectives are derived from more established theories such as social control, social learning, strain, and the like (e.g. Sampson and Laub, 1993; Agnew, 1995b; Matsueda and Heimer, 1997). These theories are founded on important meta-theoretical assumptions that are congruent with some of the pragmatist assumptions underlying interactionist theory, a point we return to later.

Second, criticism of the work of Blumstein and others emphasizes variation in a population in terms of a 'persistent, underlying criminal potential' (Nagin and Farrington, 1992: 236). This 'stable criminal propensity' approach disagrees neither with the above-mentioned concept of a criminal career as Blumstein et al. (1986) define it, nor with the observation that there are persistent patterns among individuals in their rates of criminal behavior over time (see Nagin and Land, 1993). Rather, the 'stable criminal propensity' position and the criminal careers position differ chiefly in that the propensity position rejects the claim that separate components of offending (onset, frequency, length, termination, etc.) reflect distinct causal domains, and should be analyzed separately (see Osgood and Rowe, 1994).

Instead, the stable propensity approach proposes that a single propensity underlies the full range of measures of crime (Greenberg, 1991; Osgood and Rowe, 1994). Drawing in part from the work of Wilson and Herrnstein (1985) and the sharp criticisms of Blumstein et al.'s (1986, 1988) work by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), this approach attempts to predict criminal activity over time based on population variations in stable, latent individual criminal propensities. As Osgood and Rowe (1994: 520) put it, 'the propensity position provides the baseline for gauging the need for the more complex criminal careers position.' This approach is exemplified by the studies of Rowe et al. (1990), Greenberg (1991), Nagin and Farrington (1992), and Osgood and Rowe (1994), all of which argue that latent, stable criminal propensities to some degree account for criminal behavior over the life course. The stable criminal propensity position also seeks to influence public policy by providing what are thought to be improved and more parsimonious predictions of criminal behavior over time (Osgood and Rowe, 1994).

Much recent work suggests that the stable criminal propensity position and the criminal careers approach, including its developmental theory variants, are not incompatible. Sampson and Laub's (1993) and Nagin et al.'s (1995) studies have shown that variations in criminal career trajectories are predicted by variations in social bonds throughout the life course as

well as by indicators of stable criminal propensities. Further, Paternoster and Brame (1997) call for further research and theorizing of 'dynamic factors' in the life course that channel trajectories of criminal and conventional behavior. Their research findings support what they call a 'theoretical middle ground,' as exemplified by the work of Sampson and Laub (1993), between the stable criminal propensity position and the developmental criminal careers theory of Moffitt (1993). In addition, Nagin and Land (1993: 356–8) found mixed support for both 'latent-trait criminal propensity theory' and 'conventional' criminal careers theory (e.g. Blumstein et al., 1988).

These discussions of stability and change in criminal careers have also provided a link between positivist criminal careers research and research into biological influences on crime. That is, some posit that complex interactions between individual biological characteristics and social environments may enable explanations of how stable criminal propensities interact with 'environmental insults' in order to more completely explain crime over the life course and to predict it more accurately (Rowe et al., 1990: 244–5). Biology and social environments can interact to determine criminal careers, it is argued, in at least two ways (see Jeffery, 1978, 1996; Fishbein, 1990; Walters, 1992; Booth and Osgood, 1993; Chaiken et al., 1993):

- 1 certain environments are differentially favorable to the development of biological conditions or the expression of genetic characteristics that may be conducive to crime; or
- 2 social environments channel the expression of existing biological states or genetic characteristics in ways that are conducive to crime or conformity.

Osgood and Rowe (1994: 520) state that stable criminal propensity can be conceptualized as 'an amalgam of whatever factors are relevant to crime in an individual's personality, biological make-up, interpersonal relations, and position in the social structure.'³

Third, recent statistical methodologies employed by studies of criminal career dynamics and stable criminal propensities recognize individual level indeterminacy in modeling criminal behavior over time. These methodologies include Poisson regression methods (Rowe et al., 1990; Land, 1992; Nagin and Land, 1993), as well as general linear model alternatives (Osgood and Rowe, 1994). The Poisson and mixed-Poisson regression frameworks hold that an individual's age, measures of latent criminal propensity, and any other measures of social environmental factors do not determine the actual criminal behavior outcomes for individuals, but simply an individual rate of offending which incorporates a probability distribution of outcomes characterized by a Poisson process. Thus, the Poisson framework recognizes individual level indeterminacy to the extent that it recognizes the probabilistic relationship between latent variables (such as the 'true' rate of individual offending) and measured outcomes (such as the observed frequency of offenses) (see Land, 1992; Osgood and Rowe, 1994). Additionally, Osgood and Rowe (1994) incorporate similar

assumptions of individual level indeterminacy in their general linear model alternatives to the Poisson framework. They summarize what they (and others) see as sources of indeterminacy in modeling criminal careers, and what this implies for the stable propensity and criminal careers positions:

In our conceptual framework, indeterminacy stems from two separate sources. The first is a probabilistic relationship between the measured outcome and an underlying causal dimension. [Second] It is because of this probabilistic relationship that the causal dimension is unobservable, or latent. In other words, we assume that even individuals with identical 'true' propensities to engage in crime differ in their observed offending due to innumerable random factors such as chance encounters of everyday life and error in detection or measurement. The propensity position can be defined by the assumption that a single, latent dimension determines all measures of offending. In contrast, the criminal career model implies that distinct latent causal dimensions underlie different measures.

(1994: 527–8)

Indeterminacy in predicting criminal careers, stability and change in criminal careers, and the issue of what quantitative models of criminal careers and criminal propensity can and cannot tell us are not just technical and methodological issues, but also theoretical ones. The positivist criminal career literature, as well as its stable propensity critique, would greatly benefit from a careful consideration of the pragmatist ontological position, and the symbolic interactionist research on criminal careers that is based on it.

The symbolic interactionist approach provides a unique theoretical framework for understanding four interrelated sets of issues about criminal careers:

- 1 indeterminacy and reflexivity;
- 2 stability and change in criminal careers and criminal propensity;
- 3 the respective roles of quantitative and qualitative research in criminal careers; and
- 4 the implications of criminal careers research for policy.

In addition, attention to the interactionist framework can contribute to recent developmental (Moffitt, 1993) and life-course theories (Sampson and Laub, 1993; Agnew, 1995b) of criminal careers. Below, we discuss the interrelated notions of indeterminacy, stability, and change, and then the role of quantitative and qualitative research in the context of pragmatist ontological assumptions. We then review several key exemplars of interactionist research on criminal and deviant careers and how they can contribute to further criminal careers research. In the conclusion, we discuss the implications of interactionist criminal careers research for policy.

Interactionist conceptions of criminal careers

Pragmatist assumptions: indeterminacy, stability, and change

Pragmatism and its sociological offspring, symbolic interactionism, offer a useful and sometimes underappreciated view of human social action in general (Maines, 1997), and of criminal activity in particular. Pragmatism depicts a dialectical process⁴ in which human social behavior is partially determined and partially indeterminate (Dewey, 1896; Maines, 1989). Mead (1934: 330) describes the indeterminate, or emergent dimensions of behavior this way: 'Emergence [refers to] a certain environment that exists in its relationship to an organism, and in which new characters can arise by virtue of the organism.'

The pragmatist position does not reject the notion of stable, recurring patterns in social action, nor does it reject the goal of probabilistic explanation in a science of the social (Maines, 1989; Blumer, 1993). Rather, pragmatism insists that continuity and discontinuity are inseparable and mutually constituting phases of a dialectical process (Strauss, 1993: 42). The potential for novel, emergent, unpredictable trajectories of action is inherent in human social life, and thus the social sciences will never achieve highly precise predictions of behavior (Strauss, 1993). According to Shalin:

there is a degree of indeterminacy endemic to any social whole . . . the outcome of each social encounter becomes a matter of probability. High as this probability might be, one cannot assume the outcome will follow the same pattern the next moment simply because it happened this way the moment before.

(1986: 15)

This pragmatist notion of a dialectic of determinacy and indeterminacy, and continuity and discontinuity, applies to realms of both biophysical and social conditions. In his pragmatism-based action theory, Strauss (1993) argues that biological factors, the individual's biography, and the structuring of social environments influence and condition, but do not determine, future trajectories of action. In their dialogues with early behaviorist psychology, pragmatists such as William James, John Dewey, and G.H. Mead recognized a dialectical relationship between the biological and the social—as evidenced, for example, in their rejection of Cartesian mind/body dualism. Thus, pragmatism does not deny potential biological influences on behavior, but emphasizes that the role of both biological conditions and social environments, as well as their interaction, are characterized by a dialectical process of stability and emergence, determinacy and indeterminacy (see James, 1984: 342–3; Strauss, 1993). This means that even the kind of research that focuses on the interaction of social environments and biological factors envisioned by Fishbein (1990), Booth and

Osgood (1993), and Jeffery (1996) cannot fully predict criminal career trajectories or completely identify stable criminal propensities.

As scientists of whatever field, we can investigate and discern stable patterns and regularities, and even make generalizable theoretical propositions, but individual level predictions will always to some degree be indeterminate—not just because of methodological limitations, but also because of the nature of human social activity. Pragmatism would thus allow researchers to make ontological and theoretical sense out of the individual level indeterminacy already acknowledged by the methodological strategies used by some contemporary studies of criminal careers, such as the Poisson regression framework.

Research methods: outcomes and processes

Note, however, that this pragmatist position does not deny the value of quantification or statistical modeling per se. Various interactionists have repeatedly claimed that statistics and various qualitative methods are not in conflict with each other, but are mutually complementary phases of a division of labor in empirical research (Park, 1929; Blumer, 1969; Shalin, 1986). Blumer (1956, 1969) argued that measured variables do not exert agency, even though social scientists often reify such variables and imbue them with agency in their reports of research. Instead, human beings exert agency in their interpretive actions and interactions within situational contexts. These processes and the social organizational contexts that condition them are what our variables actually measure, and variables are simply heuristic concepts that help us analyze and understand those processes and contexts. Further, quantified variables and statistical modeling are sufficient and useful for studying outcomes, or series of outcomes, of social processes and stable, obdurate contextual features that surround them. Qualitative methods such as ethnography, however, are better suited for the study of social processes themselves, which include social interaction processes, definitions of situations, decision-making processes, and contingencies and turning points in the life course (see Strauss, 1969), and the ways in which larger-scale contextual factors such as social structures are dealt with by social actors (Maines, 1982).

The positivist criminal career research tradition provides a set of techniques and quantitative strategies for studying aggregate and individual sequences of *outcomes* of criminal careers (recall, for example, that Blumstein et al., 1988 define criminal careers in terms of a series of discrete criminal events). The qualitative methodological strategies that usually (but not exclusively, see Hagan and Palloni, 1990; Matsueda, 1992) guide symbolic interactionist research on crime and criminal careers provide a way to capture and analyze the contextualized *processes* that produce the kinds of aggregate outcomes measured by quantitative criminal career models. Put differently, the qualitative strategies used by the symbolic interactionist exemplars of criminal career research we discuss later capture

the processual conditions, interpretations, decisions, activities, and their consequences (see Hall, 1995) that lie behind the quantified variables used in quantitative criminal career models. As Carl Taylor (1947: 7) put it long ago: '[Qualitative] field studies . . . place flesh, blood, and nervous system on the skeleton of statistical information.' In fact, some quantitative students of crime and the life course have already recognized the value of such qualitative research. Sampson and Laub's (1993) reanalyses of the Glueck's data, for example, include a laudable (though somewhat brief and truncated) analysis of their subjects' qualitative life histories.

Interactionist research on criminal careers

The rich and long tradition of interactionist research on crime and deviance (e.g. Lemert, 1951; Becker, 1963; Stebbins, 1971; Schur, 1980; Steffensmeier, 1986; Hagan and Palloni, 1990; Best and Luckenbill, 1994) has been based on the following assumptions (see Lofland, 1969; Matza, 1969; Strauss, 1993):

- 1 People confront situations and act on the basis of their definitions of those situations.
- 2 Different probabilities of action are conditioned by the constraints and opportunities presented by situational contexts, and definitions of situations are influenced by an actor's biography and prior repertoires of action. Further, situational and biographical constraints can influence individuals' definitions and actions both with and without their awareness of those constraints.
- 3 However, behavior involves a dialectic of choice and constraint—the potential for novel choices and emergent lines of action is always present.
- 4 Situational contexts are set by, and actors' biographies are located within, larger arrangements of institutional organization and social structure.

Lofland outlined the foci of what he termed a 'situational' or interactionist approach:

[it] focuses upon successions of dependencies through time; upon ways in which prior conditions may or may not develop into succeeding conditions of a given outcome . . . upon ways in which alternatives may or may not be present, upon ways in which, and the degree to which, action may be constrained. In contrast, a static model leads easily to static statistical profiles of the 'characteristics' associated with an outcome. Or, more particularly, it may lead to profiling the characteristics of 'types of persons', such as Republicans, murderers or juvenile delinquents.

(1969: 296)

According to Lofland, a situational approach takes 'the phenomenology of the actor rather seriously and (is) concerned with discovering and depicting it in its own terms' (p. 296). Lofland contrasts this focus to an approach which privileges the analyst's perspective. As opposed to other approaches

focusing on explanatory variables which are spatio-temporally and conceptually remote from the behavior in question, interactionist approaches 'highlight explanatory variables whose operation is relatively *proximate* to that for which an account is being given' (p. 297; our emphasis), and these proximate factors are in turn linked to larger-scale patterns of social organization.

Interactionist models of deviant or criminal careers articulate closely with Lofland's situational approach. Criminal careers are conceptualized as a process comprising a sequence of steps or stages. However, in these models it is not just the attributes of each stage that are important, but the contingencies that facilitate or constrain movement from one stage to another. The nature of this process is often compared and/or contrasted with so-called respectable careers (see Best and Luckenbill, 1994: 230–1).

Becker's (1963) *Outsiders* represents one of the most influential interactionist models of deviant careers. Borrowing from sociological studies of occupations, Becker conceptualized a deviant career as a 'sequence of movements from one position to another in an occupational system made by any individual who works in that system' (1963: 24). Based on this definition, Becker focused on the processes that comprise these sequences of movements, rather than (as in positivist models) measuring discrete sequences of outcomes. While recognizing that deviant careers could be short-lived, Becker, like Lemert (1951) before him, focused on those cases in which the actors made deviance a way of life and came to organize their identities around that pattern of deviant behavior.

In his model, Becker (1963) delineated four stages:

- 1 the commission of the first nonconforming act;
- 2 development of deviant vocabularies of motive, interests, and definitions;
- 3 public labeling and redefinition of the actor by the social audience and him/herself; and
- 4 movement into an organized deviant group.

Crucial throughout this process are deviant vocabularies of motive, neutralizations (Sykes and Matza, 1957), definitions and interests as they both account for, and are consequent to, emergent patterns of deviant behavior.

Becker's model reflects pragmatists' concern with the dialectic of choice and constraint. The social actor faces choices among alternative lines of action and these choices are variously constrained or facilitated by social structural forces. Constraints are exemplified in his discussion of how social reactions limit the possibilities for social interaction with conventional, as opposed to deviant, others (as Becker, 1963: 35 puts it, 'the treatment of deviants denies them the ordinary means of carrying on the routines of everyday life open to most people'). Alternatively, associations with deviant others can help facilitate the actor's choice to remain deviant.

Further, individual choices of lines of action can influence, in a dialectical fashion, the very forces or contingencies that condition later choices. Initial choices of deviant behavior could eventually result in constraints and restricted conventional opportunities conditioned by labeling and subsequent social reactions, invoking what Becker (1960) called ‘unfitting processes.’ It is important to remember, however, that these factors operate as *contingencies*, which are ‘factors on which mobility from one position to another depends,’ including both ‘objective facts of social structure and changes in the perspectives, motivations and desires of the individual’ (1963: 24). According to Becker:

Apprehension may not lead to increasing deviance if the situation in which the individual is apprehended for the first time occurs at a point where he can still choose between alternative lines of action. Faced, for the first time with the possible ultimate and drastic consequences of what he is doing, he may decide that he does not want to take the deviant road and turn back. If he makes the right choice, he will be welcomed back into the conventional community; but if he makes the wrong move, he will be rejected and start a cycle of increasing deviance.

(1963: 37)

Many interactionist analyses have focused on entry into, and exit from, criminal careers (Best and Luckenbill, 1994). Becker’s analysis of marijuana smokers is an example of this focus, as is Levi’s (1981) study of the ‘hit man.’ According to Levi (1981), independent professional killing—certainly a type of serious and potentially persistent criminal career—lacks most of the characteristics of other kinds of killing (e.g. those who work for organized syndicates or those who kill spontaneously) that can be used to justify the behavior. Instead, the contract, based as it is on the hit man’s reputation for profit and skill, provides him with opportunities for various neutralizations and accounts. This, however, does not fully explain *entry* into the career of independent professional killing. According to Levi, the first killing-for-hire produces extremely negative emotional responses which the killer must somehow reframe (Goffman, 1974) or redefine in order to continue in this career track. In his analysis, Levi illustrates how the killer learns how to dissociate himself from the action by disattending to personal or individual features of the victim. Such reframing is reminiscent of Becker’s (1963) analysis of how first-time marijuana smokers learn how to disattend to the negative aspects of getting high. In both cases, the accomplishment of attention framing is a career *contingency*, the occurrence of which is indeterminate and problematic and which, when it does occur, facilitates further movement into a criminal career.

In his analyses of male ordinary property offenders, Shover (1983, 1996) has examined the contingencies which accompany exit from the later stages of criminal careers. Identifying age as a major explanatory variable, he argues that it is not the biological process of aging per se that explains exit from a career of property offending but ‘the socially constructed and

negotiated changes in perspectives which accompany aging' (1983: 210). Shover found four temporal contingencies or 'changes in definitions of oneself and significant others or patterns of events in one's life,' (p. 210) including shifts in identity, an awareness of time becoming an exhaustive resource, changes in aspirations and goals, and growing tired of the relentless effects of incarceration. Property offenders also experience an interpersonal contingency that Shover defines as 'an objective change in one's social relationships or networks' (p. 210), typically involving a satisfying job or stable relationship with a woman.

As in other analyses of deviant careers, Shover found variability and unpredictability in the occurrence of, and interdependence among, these contingencies. In some cases, the occurrence of separate contingencies could not be isolated and, at times, contingencies occurred simultaneously. In many cases, temporal and interpersonal contingencies:

interacted with or followed one another as part of a dynamic process, with one type preceding and increasing the probability of occurrence for the other(s). *Imposition of a rigid temporal and causal order on this process would violate its dynamic nature, and given our present state of knowledge, would be arbitrary and premature.*

(1983: 214, our emphasis)

Shover's more recent work (1996) on persistent property offender careers also emphasizes how these offenders choose between structurally constrained alternatives at key turning points in their lives, and how these choices lead them down complicated roads of persistent and varied criminal activity, trying to 'go straight,' re-entry into crime, going straight once again, and so forth.

Best and Luckenbill (1994) have elaborated on earlier models of deviant careers, arguing that models like Becker's (1963) were too orderly, that deviant careers were more fluid and precarious and less structured than even Becker's model had allowed. For Best and Luckenbill (1994: 230), the metaphor of an escalator, 'suggesting mobility involving short passages, along visible, established routes'—used by Becker and Strauss (1956) to characterize organizational careers—is inappropriate for most criminal careers. Rather, Best and Luckenbill (1994: 231–2) use the metaphor of a 'walk through the woods—while some people take the pathways marked by their predecessors, others strike out on their own, some walk slowly, exploring before moving farther, while others run, caught up in the action.'

Best and Luckenbill build on Becker's and other interactionist models of deviance in other ways. Arguing that previous theory and research have focused on entry into, and exit from, deviant careers, their model specifies the *intermediate* stages of deviant careers. In doing so, they argue that existing literature has necessarily oversimplified the middle part of deviant careers. More importantly, Best and Luckenbill's model specifies the ways that social organization influences the multiple points of decision making

that accompany the numerous shifts possible during deviant careers. Like Becker's, Best and Luckenbill's model involves an actor who makes choices in the face of various constraints and opportunities. In each phase, the actor can continue engaging in deviant behavior or abandon the process altogether. In their model, however, deviant behavior can be a defensive reaction to outside or structural pressures, or it can simply represent a rewarding experience, or it can result from the rational choice among a variety of options.

Further, according to Best and Luckenbill (1994: 232), 'being deviant . . . involves a complex series of career shifts as individuals make their way through the deviant experience.' Such shifts may be horizontal, involving movement into parallel kinds of deviant activity such as a shift from heroin use to small-time burglary. Other shifts may be vertical, such as movement from small-time burglary to armed robbery. In the *preliminary* stage, actors assemble the necessary equipment, knowledge, skills, and motives required for an upcoming stage. In the *commission* stage, the actor carries out the new line of action, after which he/she assesses the meaning of the new experience. Upon deciding to continue this new line of action, he/she enters the *routine* stage, becoming familiar with the new activity, perhaps improving skills and developing interpretive frameworks for the experience. Finally, 'the deviant may become aware of additional options' (p. 232), thereby marking the last stage of one career shift as the first stage of another.

Adler and Adler's (1983) analysis of the middle phase of careers of upper-level drug dealers illustrates important aspects of Best and Luckenbill's model, and resonates with Shover's (1996) later work. As described by Adler and Adler, these careers are typically temporary as almost all of the dealers quit the business at some point. However, dealers who quit usually re-entered the business at different levels of dealing or assumed different roles. Thus, these careers were marked by 'shifts and oscillations' in which any particular decision to leave or return could be the last one, or could be merely another step in a continuing pattern of phase-out or re-entry. In their analysis, Adler and Adler emphasize how dealers made decisions about retirement, re-entry, or career shifts in response to changing conditions in their lives:

As dealers and smugglers aged in the career they became more sensitized to the extreme risks they faced. Cases of friends who were arrested, imprisoned, or killed began to mount. Many individuals became convinced that continued drug trafficking would inevitably lead to arrest.

(1983: 536)

There are two features of Adler and Adler's analysis of retirement from drug dealing that deserve emphasis. First, rather than a predictable outcome of a linear process, retirement appears to be marked by indecision and changes of heart. It is never quite clear if any particular decision to retire is final. Second, this decision results from choices made by dealers as

they attempt to adjust to changing contingencies in their lives. Some of these contingencies appear to facilitate retirement (e.g. mounting arrests of friends) while others facilitate remaining in the career.

Another valuable exemplar of the interactionist study of criminal careers is Steffensmeier's (1986) ethnography of the social world and career of fencing stolen goods. He describes several features that distinguish fences whose criminal careers are 'episodic, situational, and opportunistic' (p. 16) and those for whom fencing is a regular, long-term, and sustained business requiring significant skill, time, planning, and organization. Steffensmeier's ethnography focuses on the socialization, social organizational contexts, networks, skills, and career contingencies of a committed long-term business fence and his associates. In particular, his study describes in intricate detail:

- 1 the symbiotic relationships between fences and the conventional public;
- 2 the material and social rewards of a career in fencing; and
- 3 the objective contexts of opportunity and subjective definitions, attitudes, and rationalizations that make a 'successful' fencing career possible.

In a similar vein, Ulmer (1994) applied Michael Johnson's (1991) typology of commitment processes to deviant lines of action in order to critique and extend Stebbin's (1971) conceptualization of the role of negative social reaction and the potential entrenchment of commitment to criminal careers. Like Becker, Stebbins (1971) proposed a model of deviance in which sanctions can restrict some conventional lines of action and relationships and placement in deviant identities can result in the development of deviant self-concepts by actors. One key to Ulmer's application, and our discussion here, is the focus on the dialectic of social structural constraints and individual choice:

Commitment [to a criminal career] is not solely a psychological experience, nor a condition of structurally forced behavior, but a dialectic process that encompasses the social organizational factors that produce commitments and the actor's interpretation and decision-making in the face of those factors.

(Ulmer, 1994: 137)

Ulmer (1994) applies Johnson's (1991) three interrelated types of commitment to labeling processes and criminal careers contingencies. First, *structural commitment* 'derives from factors external to the individual that constrain action independently of personal and moral commitments' (Ulmer, 1994: 138–9). Second, *personal commitment* refers to 'choices based on one's desire to continue a line of action' based on personal attitudes and definitions of self (p. 138). Third, *moral commitment* involves self-constraint based on perceived obligations to others or internalized values that emphasize consistency in lines of action. At different points in criminal careers, structural and interactional contingencies arise to which the actor adjusts, reacts or resists. Consider the following propositions about the development of structural commitment to deviance (p. 149):

- 1 Restricted availability of conventional alternatives increases the attractiveness of deviant alternatives. Actors may thus adjust by continuing deviant activities and further exploring deviant opportunities and networks.
- 2 This adjustment, in turn, can lead to further reduction in the availability and attractiveness of conventional alternatives through unfitting processes.⁵
- 3 Adjustment to deviant identity placement conditions irretrievable investments in deviant activities and network relationships. These investments, in turn, further reduce the attractiveness of conventional alternatives.

Ulmer (pp. 149–50) also develops similar propositions about personal and moral commitment to deviance and their relationship to structural commitment processes.

Finally, Agnew (1995a) has recently argued that criminal behavior variously involves soft determinism, drift, or indeterminacy, depending on the biography, social context, and even biological states of individual actors. He defines five contextual conditions that alternatively foster determinacy, drift, and interdeterminacy in criminal behavior over time. Under some conditions individuals face strong constraints that channel them into criminal behavior or restrict them to conformity (soft determinism). Under other conditions individuals face relatively equal constraints and opportunities toward crime and conformity, and can *drift* into and out of criminal activity (see Matza, 1964). Under still other conditions, individuals can produce radically new and unpredictable lines of action—which might be criminal or conventional. Agnew argues that freedom of choice is greatest when individuals:

- 1 have a large number of behavioral options of both a criminal and conformist nature;
- 2 are aware of both the behavioral options in (1);
- 3 perceive as equal the biological, psychological, and social constraints for selection of the options in (1);
- 4 are under some pressure to make a choice between criminal and conformist behavioral options;
- 5 have the capacity and motivation to engage in self-directed behavior.

Agnew's arguments thus imply that such indeterminacy and drift make it impossible to predict criminal behavior trajectories with complete or even near-complete precision, no matter how rigorous the data or analytical techniques.

From Becker's (1963) early statement to more recent examples such as Shover's (1996), interactionist models of criminal careers have increased our understanding of the kinds of choices actors make and the kinds of social organizational factors that both constrain and facilitate those choices. Underlying all of this interactionist research on criminal careers is a dialectic of choice and constraint. As we have argued, positivist models emphasize the prediction of sequences of outcomes in criminal careers. In these models, the primary goal is identifying correlates of these career outcomes and inferring the causal factors at work. Further, the causal

factors are also often distal, removed in time and space from the immediate context of action. On the other hand, interactionist models of criminal careers take seriously a dialectic of choice and constraint. From this perspective, the actor confronts larger social organizational arrangements in everyday life and makes choices that are variously facilitated and constrained by these arrangements. These choices pose consequences for the social context in which the actor is embedded that in turn facilitate and constrain subsequent choices. Accordingly, while in the aggregate criminal career patterns are probabilistically predictable, at the individual level criminal careers and the actions that they comprise are to some extent indeterminate, as Agnew (1995a) implies. The choices made by actors are, to a large extent, situational in nature and not amenable to precise prediction and control (for more on the need for situational analyses of crime and deviance, see McCarthy and Hagan, 1992).

Contributions of interactionist models of criminal careers

Symbolic interactionism's emphasis on the dialectic of determinacy and indeterminacy, reflexivity, choice and constraint, the dialectic of stability and change, and the roles of quantitative and qualitative research contribute to our understanding of at least four key issues in the study of criminal careers. First, it emphasizes dialectics of determinacy and indeterminacy, as well as stability and change over the life course. This means that social actors reflexively confront problematic situations in the present, make decisions, and construct future lines of action by drawing on previously constructed definitions and interpretations, prior repertoires of action, and by accounting for and confronting previously mobilized constraints. All of these are sources of continuity, and to some extent determinacy in social behavior (see Blumer, 1993). However, actors always have the potential to adapt to present situations, constraints, and contingencies in creative, novel, or otherwise unpredictable ways, and this potential is a constant source of indeterminacy and change.

We argue that the kind of dialectic described by pragmatist ontology between stability and change lies behind the findings from the growing number of quantitative studies that find support for both the stable propensity position and the differential-cause criminal careers position, such as Sampson and Laub (1993), Nagin et al. (1995), and Paternoster and Brame (1997). On the one hand, continuities in criminal or conventional behavior over the life course would be expected when social structural environments present relatively stable constraints and opportunities, when individuals' prior socialization imparts relatively enduring attitudes, definitions, self-concepts, conventional social bonds (or lack thereof), and repertoires of action. Under such conditions, it would make sense to speak of stable criminal propensities. On the other hand, the work

of Matza (1969), Adler and Adler (1983), Agnew (1995a, 1995b), Ulmer (1994) and Shover (1996), strongly suggests that various phases of criminal careers, and varying kinds of criminal careers, may be qualitatively different from one another. Different temporal dimensions of criminal careers, such as entry, frequency of offending, duration, and exit may entail different objective and subjective contingencies, constraints, and opportunities (Lofland, 1969), different kinds of problematic situations to be confronted by individuals, and different adaptations to those situations. This is what is meant, for example, by Adler and Adler's phrase 'shifts and oscillations' as a description of the careers of upper-level drug dealers. Thus, an interactionist framework can make theoretical sense out of the debate between the notion of stable criminal propensities and the notion that different phases of criminal careers are potentially conditioned by different factors, providing the kind of 'theoretical middle ground' between them called for by Paternoster and Brame (1997).

Second, interactionist conceptualizations of criminal careers recognize the value of quantitative studies of the outcomes, or series of outcomes, of social activity. Our research cannot stop there, however. Our understandings of criminal careers must also be informed by qualitative data and analyses, such as those we discussed earlier, that can better investigate the action processes themselves as well as the proximal, situational contexts that encompass and condition them (see also McCarthy and Hagan, 1992). Research on criminal careers would therefore be improved by a methodological division of labor in which quantitative models of criminal career outcomes (including longitudinal sequences of outcomes) and qualitative studies of social processes and their situational contexts mutually sensitize one another.

Third, there are points of congruence between the meta-theoretical assumptions underlying both developmental/life course perspectives and symbolic interactionist perspectives that facilitate this division of theoretical and methodological labor. For example, Sampson and Laub's (1993) model stresses, and attempts to explain, both continuity and change in delinquent and criminal behavior over time. Further, they argue that the causal influences they found are bi-directional or reciprocal over the life course. For example, they quote (p. 235) Thornberry et al.:

The initially weak bonds lead to high delinquency involvement, the high delinquency involvement further weakens the conventional bonds, and in combination both of these effects make it extremely difficult to reestablish bonds to conventional society at later ages. As a result, all of these factors tend to reinforce one another over time to produce an extremely high probability of continued deviance.

(Sampson and Laub, 1993: 30)

Likewise, Agnew (1995b) speaks of an amplification loop involving reciprocal relations between causal factors. For example, in his model aggressive

traits can result in aversive reactions from others (e.g. peers, adults) and these aversive reactions can reinforce those aggressive traits.

These kinds of reflexive relationships can help explain stability, as well as escalation, in criminal career trajectories. Best and Luckenbill's (1994) model focuses on the specific factors that produce this stability, examining the multiple decision points that occur within different social organizational contexts. Likewise, Steffensmeier (1986) showed how networks of relationships and organizational factors operated as career contingencies that produced continuity in criminal activity. However, at the same time, symbolic interactionism understands that subtle changes in decision making and interactive dynamics can introduce significant changes in these career trajectories. For example, while Adler and Adler (1983) showed how dealers become increasingly sensitized to the risks of the drug trade, they emphasized how this decision making resulted in both retirement *and* re-entry.

At a theoretical level, developmental/life course theories typically assume, or infer, these interpretive and interactive processes, which are the *focus* of interactionist work. For example, in offering reasons why adolescents are more likely to view their environment as aversive, Agnew (1995b) talks of increasing egocentrism that is exacerbated by:

- 1 the belief that others are just as obsessed by behavior and appearance; and
- 2 the public nature of their social world, such as much of their negative treatment occurs before an audience.

In the first instance, interactionist theory and research draws our attention squarely to the interpretive processes that constitute the self. In the second instance, interactionism focuses on the interactive dynamics that constitute the 'front stage' behavior of social actors (Goffman, 1959).

Sampson and Laub (1993) also have a place for interpretive processes in understanding how contextual, structural factors indirectly affect delinquent behavior. Their use of qualitative narrative data to shed light on these processes, while admirable, fails to adequately conceptualize these processes. Consider their finding that formal sanctions effect delinquency through their effect on social bonds such as conventional employment. Their discussion of this finding does not address the specific interpretive and interactive processes which constitute this causal effect. Ulmer (1994), however, captures this idea in his use of Johnson's (1991) concept of structural commitment as a set of contingencies by which criminal sanctions can constrain conventional action and make continued delinquent or criminal behavior both structurally more available and subjectively more attractive.

Sampson and Laub (1993: 252) call for the 'need to identify subjective transitions in the life course independently of behavioral transitions.' These changes in how actors define, and adjust to, their social worlds have been the focus of each of the pieces of interactionist research we discussed earlier. For example, Adler and Adler's (1983) work serves as an exemplar

here by privileging the actor's perspective, focusing on shifts in perceptions of self and situation through the life course. Likewise, Levi (1981) examined the complex interpretive process of reframing that conditioned the hit man's entrance into professional killing.

Finally, many discussions of the politics of crime have noted that constructing crime as an individual problem, to be solved by individual interventions, treatments, and control strategies, is more palatable in the contemporary American political climate than addressing social contexts, especially large-scale structural ones (see Schur, 1980; Skolnick, 1995). The assumption of the new penology, as Feeley and Simon's (1992) critique argues, is that policies regarding crime cannot realistically address social structures and contexts conducive to crime, but the criminal justice system can hope to predict the behavior of, classify, and manage individual offenders. Yet, as we noted, many adherents to the positivist study of criminal careers are quite wary of using such research findings for proactive prediction and control of individual offenders. They recognize the methodological limits of individual level prediction and the role of indeterminacy at the individual level, as the logic of the Poisson regression framework demonstrates. Many scholars who do such positivist research emphasize crime policies directed at social contexts, and distance themselves from policies like selective incapacitation or proactive medical-model treatment regimes (for example, see Blumstein, 1993; Gottfredson and Gottfredson, 1994). Pragmatist assumptions, and the various interactionist approaches to criminal careers discussed earlier, would provide criminal careers research with sound theoretical reasons why policies would do better to address the cultural, structural, community, and situational contexts within which conventional opportunities are constrained, criminal opportunities are relatively more available, and criminal choices are seen as more attractive (see also Stark, 1987).

An interactionist approach to criminal careers would support policies that take the dialectic of choice and constraint seriously. Policies that are serious about channeling individuals away from or out of criminal careers would be directed at the social structures, institutional contexts, communities, peer groups, and families that present the situational constraints and opportunities within which developmental processes take place, biographies unfold, and within which people make choices between conventional and criminal activity. These kinds of policies would address the availability and attractiveness of conventional and criminal learning and performance opportunities (Cloward, 1959; Ulmer, 1994) and the ways these are configured by larger-scale arrangements of community, institutional structure, and stratification.

There is a distinct irony here. Symbolic interactionism is often mischaracterized as a perspective that only applies to the micro-level realm of individual minds, behavior and interaction. However, the types of social policies it encourages are not individual level ones but ones aimed at the interrelationship between larger-scale social organization and situational

contexts of action (see Maines and Morrione, 1990; Hall, 1995). This, by the way, is exactly the type of social reform efforts in the realms of education, poverty, urban land use, and crime developed and supported by the early pragmatists (see Shalin, 1986; Maines, 1997).

An interactionist view of human behavior and criminal careers would lead us even further away from the notion that scientific progress will bring us increasingly accurate ability to predict individuals' criminal behavior, and that what we can predict, we can control. Instead, we would recognize that continuity and change are inseparable, and that biology, previous behavior and experience, and constraints and opportunities may influence, but never totally determine the contingencies and choices involved in criminal activity throughout the life course. This view, and the theoretical models and research programs that derive from it, provide an important complementary approach to the study of criminal careers.

Notes

An earlier version of this article was presented at the 1995 annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology, 15 November, Boston, MA.

1. Hopes for incorporating criminal careers research findings into policies that target individual offenders are based on the kind of 'theory growth' model of cumulative scientific progress described and critiqued by Camic (1992) and Maines et al. (1996). That is, some scholars have argued that with continued and cumulative progress in terms of better social science, psychological, or perhaps biological data and more sophisticated statistical modeling techniques, criminal risk prediction will allow social control policies of more proactive individual level intervention. Such envisioned interventions could include selective incapacitation, selective psychological treatment regimes, and perhaps even drug or gene therapy (Jeffery, 1993; Katz and Chambliss, 1995; Visser, 1995).
2. They continue: 'the current state of knowledge is not even close to having an adequate understanding of the causes of violence that would be needed to classify violent offenders and to predict violence with great accuracy' (1993: 229). Exemplifying the positivist notion of cumulative scientific progress, they argue that advances in research can enable greater accuracy in prediction and classification in the future.
3. Three of the most compelling statements regarding the role of biological and/or genetic factors in stable criminal propensities, and the possibilities of using such information to aid criminal justice decision making come from Jeffery (1978, 1996) and Fishbein (1990). Both recognize potential ethical problems with such an approach, but both foresee the effective use of such information and interventions:

Overall, evidence to suggest that biological conditions have a profound impact on the adaptive, cognitive, and emotional abilities of the in-

dividual is compelling . . . The capability to identify and predict the factors responsible for maladaptivity may eventually enable society to employ innovative methods of early detection, prevention, and evaluation.

(Fishbein, 1990: 46; our emphasis)

Jeffery calls for a major interdisciplinary research effort that is not race, class, or gender-biased, but is directed at individual level intervention and prevention of crime.

Whether or not a given individual has a genetic predisposition to crime must be examined at the individual level, not at the social level in terms of categories such as race or class or gender . . . the prevention of criminal behavior must involve genetics, the neurosciences, psychopharmacology, and neuropsychiatry as well as biological criminology in a major interdisciplinary effort.

(1996: 2–3)

4. Pragmatists and symbolic interactionists use the term ‘dialectical’ to refer to an ontological relationship in which two or more conditions, objects, or phenomena mutually constitute, define, constrain, and enable one another (see Perinbanayagam, 1991; Joas, 1993). For example, they see the individual, social interaction, and social organization as dialectically related in that each reciprocally enables, creates, and influences one another in an ongoing process that is characterized by both stable patterns and creative emergence (see Shalin, 1986).
5. ‘Unfitting processes,’ a term coined by Becker (1960), refers to processes by which an actor’s choices in the present restrict the availability of alternative lines of action in the future.

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