

TRAJECTORIES AND PATHWAYS: THE LIFE COURSE OF AN ASPIRING CONVICT CRIMINOLOGIST

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Introduction

The majority of criminological theories are based on the social causation and/or trait-based causes of crime which seek to explain the onset of criminal behavior. On the other hand there has been scarce theoretical attention that sufficiently addresses why individuals stop committing crime (Laub and Sampson, 2003). Previous research has examined the influences of employment and marriage (Laub and Sampson, 2003; Sampson and Laub, 1993; Uggen, 2000), self-help groups, such as AA or NA (see Terry, 2003) as well as religion (see Schroder and Frana, 2009). The one thing that is evident from these works is that the etiology of desistance requires additional research.

In order to understand the desistance process it is perhaps best addressed by utilizing a life course perspective which involves two central concepts, trajectories and turning points. Trajectories are long-term patterns of behavior while turning points are short-term life changing events (Elder, 1985). By applying a life course perspective to my personal experiences within the desistance process we will see how experiences as a child may have predisposed me to a life of crime as well as how explicit turning points later in life have influenced the current trajectory of my life as an aspiring Convict Criminologist.

Incarceration as a Way of Life

A trajectory, or pathway, into a life of crime was provided early in life. As a child my family moved a lot, it was not uncommon to attend two or three different schools in any given year. My first brush with law enforcement was at age 14 when, at a motel my family called home, after washing a car for a neighbor, for which I was to be paid in marijuana, I accidentally drove the car through the motel lobbies plate glass window. Unbeknownst to me was that the car had been stolen and there were drugs in the car; the courts ordered me to serve six months unsupervised probation for this act. I began selling drugs, primarily to military personnel and tourists, at age 16.

It was not long before I established a lengthy criminal resume. To summarize, I am a “bitch,” a habitual criminal offender. From 1980-1999, I was arrested 13 times and served time in jail (less than 365 days) in seven different jurisdictions and have been convicted three times for felony crimes and served prison sentences (sentences in excess of 365 days) in two different jurisdictions. In 1999 while traveling through the state of Indiana I burglarized a liquor store, for the purpose of obtaining monies in order to prolong a three day crack cocaine binge. For this act I received an eight year sentence, with five years suspended, to be served as probation upon release.

In the state of Indiana virtually all prisoners upon release are under some form of supervision, either probation or parole. How one is supervised is contingent upon how they were sentenced. For example, an individual who is sentenced to eight years with no time suspended can earn day-for-day good time credit while in prison; as such the eight year sentence will be complete in four years. Accordingly, a maximum of two years of the four years of good time credit are to be served as parole. As noted above I was ordered to serve five of my eight year sentence on probation.

Two weeks prior to my release date authorities asked me what my plans were upon release, with no where to call home and no friends in the area it was decided that on my release date I would be transported to the court where I was convicted to make arrangements with probation authorities there. At 4:00 am on January 16, 2001, I was delivered to the sentencing court house. It was a typical Northern Indiana day, bitterly cold with four feet of snow on the ground. Dressed in prison issued khakis, with a check from work release for \$1100 in my pocket, and nowhere to go, I stood in the snow for five hours until the probation office opened.

Release and Probation

Upon meeting my probation officer (PO) I explained that I did not know anybody in Indiana and for that reason was requesting to have my case transferred to Louisville, Kentucky (KY). As the PO was familiar with a half-way house there, I was instructed to take a bus to KY that day and he would prepare the proper paperwork requesting that my probation to be

transferred to KY.

It needs to be noted at this point that in Indiana POs do not have the power to arrest and are required to have a minimum of a four year degree. It has been my experience that the primary objective for Indiana POs is to assist individuals with the re-entry process. Unfortunately, this is not the case for all jurisdictions in America as each of the 50 states can implement policies as they see fit. For instance, in KY POs are an extension of law enforcement who tend to possess a “trail em and nail em” mentality (Richards, Austin and Jones, 2003a) which often results in distrust by offenders (see Frana and Schroder, 2008).

During my first communication with KY authorities I was advised that a half-way house was not a suitable residence and that other living arrangements would have to be made. In reality, as I was just released from prison, I had no desire to live with a bunch of men, so with the money I had saved from work-release; I happily made other living arrangements. Within a month of moving into an apartment I was arrested by KY probation for a crime which occurred ten years previously. I was detained in pre-trial detention for 60 days. Due to lack of evidence the case was dismissed and I was released back to the street; with no money and no place to go.

I briefly returned to the half-way house and within three months I had secured housing, acquired full-time union employment, and enrolled as a part-time student of sociology at a major university. Shortly afterwards the state of KY turned down my request to transfer my probation. It was stated that due to my criminal history I was deemed a high risk to return to prison and as such had to vacate the state of KY; I relocated ten kilometers away in the state of Indiana.

As I was originally sentenced in Indiana (IN) it was simply a formality to have my probation transferred to a different jurisdiction within the state. My first meeting with authorities was much more hospitable than those with KY officials. IN probation officials overall were impressed with my re-entry progress (i.e. gainful employment, and educational pursuits). In fact, during the four and a half years I was supervised by IN probation I was never subjected to a home visit, was only urinalysis tested for drugs three times and cannot recall any adverse

interactions with IN officials. In fact at one point it came to the attention of my Indiana PO that I had regularly been driving an automobile without a driver license; an offense which could result in me being sent back to prison for violating the terms of probation. Instead of revoking my probation the PO assisted me in navigating the governmental bureaucracy with the intended goal of acquiring a driver's license. It was understood, though not verbally stated, that I had to drive in order to work and attend school and that I would not suffer any consequences for my illegal driving activities as long as I did not get caught and that I needed to address this issue and obtain a legal license immediately.

A New Pathway: Education

During my time on probation I had decided to enrol in university. In the past I had never given education much thought. I had received a G.E.D (high school equivalent in the USA) while in a county jail for the sole purpose of obtaining a 15 day time cut. When I first arrived at university, like many undergrads, I was unsure what I was doing there. Unbeknownst to me at that time enrolment in university would be a turning point which would alter the trajectory, yet again, of my life.

I was shocked to discover that most of the students I attended classes with had never been incarcerated, nor had they experienced poverty. Various sociological concepts were easy for me to grasp, I understood the "subculture of poverty" (Lewis, 1959) and the convict code (Irwin, 1970; Irwin and Cressey, 1962; Sykes, 1958; Terry, 1997; Trammell, 2009) intuitively as I had lived these concepts. This was not the case with criminal justice courses. I regularly struggled to discuss or write about what I as a convict knew were the realities of incarceration and/or community corrections, which regularly were opposed to the theoretical or practitioner perspective presented in classes. In one class a professor stated that gangs were so prominent in American prisons that as soon as a convict arrives at a prison they must join a gang for protection. I informed the professor, as well as the other 150 students in attendance, that he was unfortunately misinformed, and had no idea what he was talking about (the actual words which I used are not suitable for print in this forum).

An Introduction to Convict Criminology

During my second year at university (Spring 2003) I was invited to meet with some

researchers who wished to discuss how I was staying out of prison. At this meeting I would discover that the researchers, Stephen Richards and Richard Jones, were themselves former convicts. After the interview and having learned of my status as a student I was taken aside and formally introduced to Convict Criminology (see Austin, Richards and Jones, 2003a, 2003b; Richards, Austin and Jones 2004a, 2004b). During the discussion which followed I expressed that I was struggling in my studies as most of my class readings and lectures regarding prisons and prisoners seemed, to me, like nothing more than propaganda. I was directed to several works which contained a more critical approach which they felt would assist; I was also informed that if I *ever* needed any form of academic assistance they were there to assist.

I now returned to campus with renewed vigor, having been exposed to academic works with a critical orientation which was in stark contrast to what I saw as the dominant theory in criminology; rational choice. No longer would I write a paper that I knew to be spurious just to satisfy a class requirement. With a renewed passion for academia I now reflected on my life of crime for inspiration. In the past I had heard anecdotal stories of a diversion policy of utilizing military enlistment as an alternative to incarceration. Much to my dismay there is virtually no research on this topic. So during my senior year I designed and conducted research to discover if prisoners would welcome military enlistment as an alternative to imprisonment or as a condition of parole (Frana and Schroder, 2008). Not only did I enjoy going to prison to collect data, some suggested I was good at it, as my co-author and mentor for this project stated that the prisoners would never had opened up to him (a traditional academic) like they did with me. With this experience another path was suggested; grad school.

Graduate School

Two significant events occurred during my first year of graduate study. First, as a result of my writing (Frana and Schroder, 2008) I received communications from two government bodies seeking my collaboration for drafting criminal justice legislation (me a former convict). Second, upon completion of my Master's Thesis Proposal with committee approval, the department chair denied my proposal and advised me that I would not be permitted to conduct research in the Indiana state prison system. These two experiences revealed that not

only could my works influence change but also that one cannot run from the past as even in the “ivory towers” (see Ross et al., 2009) of academia I will still experience discrimination due to my status as a former convict.

As a graduate teaching assistant I was afforded the opportunity to facilitate numerous classes’. In one class, community corrections, while examining the role of probation officials regarding pre-sentence investigations I would distribute a pre-sentence report which was written about me regarding my last conviction and have each student suggest, to the hypothetical court, sentencing recommendations. During this exercise few students expressed any type of empathy. These students were regularly flabbergasted to learn that I, their teacher, was the person for whom they often recommended severe punishments. During the 2009-2010 academic year I would receive a university wide award as “Outstanding Graduate Teaching Assistant.”

Conclusion and Discussion

The above discussion outlines the trajectories and turning points which have contributed to my desistance from an extended life of crime. My life began in poverty; I dropped out of school in the 8th grade at which time incarceration seemed inevitable. The basis of this brief autobiography comes, for the most part, from my experiences teaching and lecturing specifically on topics of community corrections and the life course theory. When delivering these lectures I try to emphasize to students, particularly those seeking careers in law enforcement, corrections, and/or probation and parole, that a turning point in a person’s life may occur at any time and that *they* could be the vessel of that turning point which could alter the trajectory of an individual’s life all that is required is perhaps a little empathy and to abandon the us against them mentality which is dominant in American corrections today (see Frana, Lenza and Schroder, 2012).

By applying a life course perspective to my personal pathway to desistance we can see, as previous works have, (Laub and Sampson, 2003; Maruna, 2001; Sampson and Laub, 1993; Schroder and Frana, 2009; Uggen, 2000) that employment along with continued education has had a positive influence. The turning points and trajectories which have influenced my life since my last release from prison seemed insignificant when they occurred. It is only in

hindsight, after thoughtful reflection, that their importance is exposed. I am confident there were other turning points that I am not aware of and whose significance is as yet not understood.

Like many other academics, the complexities of desistance, including that of my own, remain elusive. I cannot empirically state that the etiology of my desistance from crime has been the result of my experiences with probation, marriage, employment, family, education, or even a combination of all, though it does provide some insight into the desistance process of one aspiring convict criminologist. My affiliation with Convict Criminology has unquestionably been important with advancing in education.

In prison people always make plans for their pending release regularly highlighting the changes which would need to occur in order to remain free. Consequently, it could be argued that release from prison is “*the*” turning point in a convicts’ life. These changes are regularly contingent upon probation and parole authorities’ approval. This perhaps has been the most important aspect of how I have been able to remain out of prison over the last 12 years; my experiences with probation officials. Had I stayed in KY, with their “tail-em and nail-em” mentality I am convinced that I would have been returned to prison. By being supervised in the state of IN, who poses a more empathetic and humanistic philosophy to corrections have I been able to continue to move forward and live a life where imprisonment no longer seems inevitable. As such it is suggested that jurisdictions abandon policies related to POs being an extension of law enforcement and consider a mission of helping persons with desistance.

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