

**Crime and the Life Course:
Interview Case Study Paper Assignment
Due Date: December 6, 2018**

Background

An important source of data for studying crime across the life course comes from qualitative case study interviews. Some classic examples include Clifford Shaw's (1930) *The Jack Roller*, John Allen's (1977) *Assault with a Deadly Weapon*, Shadd Maruna's (2001) narratives in *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild their Lives*, and Laub and Sampson's (2003) narratives in *Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives: Delinquent Boys to Age 70*. The trick in using such data is to identify important trajectories and turning points and then explain them with existing sociological and criminological theory.

Purpose of the Assignment

This assignment will allow you to follow this tradition in criminology by interviewing a subject, probing for key trajectories and turning points, and applying one of the sociological theories presented in class to make sense of such trajectories and turning points. You will first select a suitable subject for an interview, set up a time to devote one hour to conduct an in-depth interview. In the interview, you will ask about the subject's history of deviance or crime, about role-transitions and their timing (or absence of role-transitions), and then about potential theoretical mechanisms surrounding the effects or lack of effects of role-transitions. You will then write up the results in a term paper of no more than 5 pages.

Specific Instructions

Your task consists of three steps: (1) selecting a subject and conducting an in-depth interview with them; (2) analyzing the interview results in light of theoretical perspectives presented in class and identifying a theory or set of theories that best explains the interview findings; and (3) writing up the results in a five-page paper.

Part A. Select an Interview Subject and Conduct a One-Hour Interview

You may select anyone for the interview, including a roommate, friend, acquaintance, family member, etc. The interview is probably best done face-to-face, but a phone interview is allowed. When you approach the subject, emphasize that the interview is strictly for a class assignment, is entirely anonymous, and will entail questions about crime and deviance, as well as life course events. Also emphasize that the subject may refuse to answer any question that he or she feels uncomfortable answering, and may end the interview at any time. Once they agree set up a time to conduct the interview in a semi-private location. You should take careful notes during the interview. You may audio record the interview—with the subject's permission—so you can go back to fill in specifics that you may have missed in your notes. Note that a subject's narrative (story) about a key deviant act or role transition can be a rich source of data.

The purpose of the interview is to elicit information about (1) offending histories, (2) life course transitions, and (3) potential causal mechanisms explaining the effect (or lack of effect) of life course transitions on offending trajectories (such as turning points). Information on offending histories would include one-time acts, as well as continuous deviant acts with starting and stopping points. If the subject appears to have refrained from crimes throughout the life course, you may either focus on why they refrained from crime, or ask about minor forms of deviance, such as telling white lies, smoking, etc. The important point is to obtain an overall portrait of the pattern of offending over the subject's life course. Information on life course transitions may begin with information on early childhood experiences with the family and school, which help shape the likelihood of future role transitions. Other role transitions include changing peer groups, roles in school, graduation, work and careers, romantic relationships, marriage, parenting, and

military service. Consult the life course calendar for examples. Information on causal mechanisms derive from theories of crime and desistance, including attachment and commitment to roles, learning definitions favorable and unfavorable to crime, learning through reinforcement and modeling, utility maximization, cognitive transformations and hooks for change, role-taking and decision-making, changes in reference groups, and formation of habits.

Here are some tips on eliciting information on potential turning points and causal mechanisms.

- *Criminal Opportunities.* One possible way of getting at decision points would be to ask the subject whether they have opportunities to commit certain crimes. Then ask why they would take advantage of such opportunities at some times but not others.
- *Timing of Crime.* A potentially useful question for subjects who admit to committing a crime, would be about timing: why then and not earlier? When a subject initiates a crime, ask about the subject's life circumstances at that time, particularly any changes in circumstances. Similarly, when a subject desists from crime or deviance, ask about changes in life circumstances at this time.
- *Timing of Life Course Roles.* When a subject reports making a major life course transition, for example out of a delinquent gang, or into college, ask if it changed their lives in a major way. Did it change their everyday routines (which may be related to criminal opportunities)?
- *Subjective Perspective.* Try to get at the subject's thought process at the time of initiating deviance, or passing up an opportunity to deviate, or making a decision to continue to deviate. What were they thinking at the time? Were they thinking rationally? Were they considering consequences, including short-term and long term. What did the deviant act mean to them at the time? Did it remain that way in the future?
- *Friends, Siblings, Colleagues, coworkers.* You might ask the subject whether his or her friends or siblings have engaged in deviance, whether they followed, and if not, why not. Also, what was said that may have influenced a decision to join or refrain from deviance?
- *Subjective Account of Why they did it.* Although you don't want to put words in the subject's mouth, as a last resort you might ask them why they engaged in the crime or refrained from a criminal opportunity. What motivated them? Why at this time and not another time?

These are just a few examples of interview techniques that may elicit important information on offending trajectories and turning points, life course transitions, and causal mechanisms explaining stability and change in offending. You need not employ all of them, but one or more will likely be useful, depending on the content and direction of your interview.

Part B. Analyze the Interview Results.

Once your interview is completed, carefully write out your notes in a legible form, perhaps using your audio recording to fill in gaps. Map out what looks like a trajectory and possible turning points. See if turning points correspond to changes in life circumstances, such as life course role transitions. If they do, examine the subject's subjective perspective in light of causal mechanisms from life course theories of crime. Which theory or theories (if any) appear supported by the evidence? If the answer is none, consider why this might be? If there are no turning points, try to account for stability in offending or non-offending.

Part C. Write the Results Up in a Five-Page Paper

After completing your analysis, consider an outline of the paper. You can structure the paper however you

want; one potential structure would be as follows:

1. *Introduction*: Say something about life course and crime and using a case study life history to develop a theoretical understanding of crime across the life course, then describe the interview setting and how you'll use the results (¼ page).
2. *Criminal Offending: Trajectories and Turning Points*. Describe the pattern of crime or deviance (however minor) across the person's life course. You may then say you to focus on a particular period of change or stability (1 page).
3. *Role Transitions*. Describe the pattern of role transitions the subject has undergone (beginning perhaps with early child hood parenting), while highlighting those patterns most relevant to change or stability in offending (1 page)
4. *Causal Mechanisms*. Discuss specific instances of stability or change in offending in relation to role transitions and causal mechanisms derived from broader theory. You may want to focus on a specific causal mechanism that best explains your interview data, or consider more than one. (2 pages)
5. *Conclusions*. Briefly draw conclusions from your analysis and discuss whether this is likely a general finding (generalizable beyond your single case) in light of other findings in life course criminology (¾ page)

Format

The paper should be typed, double-spaced, and *no longer than 5 pages* (use 12 pt font). Add a cover page giving your name, the date, the course, and a paper title. Staple the paper in the upper left-hand corner and do not use a folder or plastic cover. Papers are due **June 6th** at the beginning of class. The paper is worth a total of 50 points toward your final grade. (Don't be late! Late papers will be penalized *severely*: ½ point will be taken off per day late.)

Writing Assistance

For assistance on writing, consult the Sociology Writing Center (with webpage <https://soc.washington.edu/sociology-writing-center>). We also highly recommend the little book, *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White. The first edition is available on the web at: <http://www.bartleby.com/141>.

A Note on Plagiarism

Plagiarism is defined as "the unauthorized use or close imitation of the language and thoughts of another author and the representation of them as one's own original work." As straight-forward as this may sound, many students are often uncertain about what constitutes plagiarism, which is a violation of the student code, and punishable at the University of Washington. Plagiarism includes any of the following:

1. Using another writer's ideas without proper citation.
2. Citing your source but reproducing the exact words of a printed source without quotation marks.
3. Borrowing the structure of another author's phrases or sentences without crediting the author from whom it came.
4. Borrowing all or part of another student's paper or using someone else's outline to write your own paper.
5. Using a paper writing "service" or having a friend write the paper for you.

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Bottom line: Don't Plagiarize!