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## **Gender, Crime, and Desistance: Toward a Theory of Cognitive Transformation<sup>1</sup>**

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This article analyzes data derived from the first detailed long-term follow-up of a sample of serious adolescent female delinquents and similarly situated males. Neither marital attachment nor job stability, factors frequently associated with male desistance from crime, were strongly related to female or male desistance. A symbolic-interactionist perspective on desistance is developed as a counterpoint to Sampson and Laub's theory of informal social control, and life history narratives are used to illustrate the perspective. This cognitive theory is generally compatible with a control approach but (a) adds specificity regarding underlying change mechanisms, (b) explains some negative cases, and (c) fits well with life course challenges facing contemporary serious female (and more provisionally male) offenders.

In a series of recent analyses, Robert Sampson and John Laub highlight the importance of marital attachment and job stability as key factors associated with desistance from crime (Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998; Laub and Sampson 1993; Sampson and Laub 1993). While the delinquents they studied were more likely than others to continue to offend as adults, there was considerable variability in the success of their adult transitions and in the timing of movement away from a criminal lifestyle. Sampson and Laub develop a social control explanation that emphasizes the gradual

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buildup of investments that tend to accrue in the presence of strong bonds of attachment (“the good marriage effect”) and steady employment. This focus on variability and on the impact of adult social bonds also adds to the broader intellectual tradition that emphasizes the ways in which socialization and development continue across the full range of the individual life course (Claussen 1993; Elder 1998; Josselson 1996; Shanahan 2000).

A potential limitation of this important body of work is that the sample on which the analyses were based was composed entirely of white male offenders who matured into adulthood during the 1950s. Thus it is not clear whether the findings described (or the theory that derives from them) effectively capture the experiences of female or minority delinquents or, more generally, offenders coming of age within the context of a more contemporary social and economic landscape. We contribute to the literature on desistance processes by presenting results of the first detailed long-term follow-up study of a cohort of serious adolescent female offenders and a similarly situated male comparison group. We collected both quantitative and qualitative data at the adult follow-up and have found both “ways of knowing” (Polkinghorne 1988) useful in different respects. In this article, we first examine the quantitative data to determine whether factors such as marital attachment or job stability are associated with female as well as male desistance from criminal activity. Because our sample contains a significant percentage of minority respondents, and follow-up data were collected in the mid-1990s, we can also consider how race/ethnicity and (indirectly) historical changes further complicate the picture.

We then turn to the relatively unstructured life history narratives we elicited from respondents during the follow-up. Many of these narratives exceed 100 pages in length. They are useful not only as an aid in interpreting the quantitative findings, but they also provide a close-in perspective on mechanisms through which actors indicate that changes in life direction have been accomplished. It is primarily through our analyses of these narratives that we developed a somewhat different perspective on desistance. Our provisional theory centers on the *cognitive shifts* that frequently occur as an integral part of the desistance process. For purposes of exposition, we contrast this “theory of cognitive transformation” with the social control framework Sampson and Laub and other scholars have emphasized. While our ideas are not fundamentally incompatible with a social control approach, we cover somewhat different conceptual terrain.

Social control theory emphasizes the ways in which a close marital bond or stable job gradually exert a constraining influence on behavior as—over a period of time—actors build up higher levels of commitment (capital) via the traditional institutional frameworks of family and work.

Social control is thus essentially a theory of constraint that is focused on the long haul.

In our view, this provides an important but incomplete accounting of change processes, because the perspective tends to bracket off the “up front” work accomplished by actors themselves—as they make initial moves toward, help to craft, and work to sustain a different way of life. We wish to emphasize the actor’s own role in creatively and selectively appropriating elements in the environment (we will refer to these elements as “hooks for change”), including, but not limited to, such positive influences as a spouse. We argue that these elements will serve well as catalysts for lasting change when they energize rather fundamental shifts in identity and changes in the meaning and desirability of deviant/criminal behavior itself. The latter notion contrasts with a basic assumption of control theory—that an individual’s motivation or proclivity to deviate can be considered a constant, while it is the degree of external and internal control that varies considerably (e.g., across individuals or across the period encompassed by an individual life course).

In emphasizing cognitive and identity transformations and the actor’s own role in the transformation process, our perspective seems most compatible with the basic tenets of symbolic interaction. This more “agentic” view of desistance balances some of the exteriority and constraint assumptions implicit in a control approach. It is useful for (1) highlighting the important period when actors make initial attempts to veer off a deviant pathway (when, almost by definition, various forms of capital have not had much chance to accumulate); (2) accommodating the observation that quite a few individuals exposed to prosocial experiences like those associated with marriage or job opportunities fail to take advantage of them (they persist in offending anyway); and (3) focusing on cognitive changes, rather than a small set of predictors. This provides a measure of conceptual flexibility. That is, it takes into consideration individuals who manage to change their life direction, even in the absence of traditional frameworks of support and resources like those provided by a spouse or good job.

We conclude that this symbolic-interactionist perspective can in most respects be integrated with social control notions. Such an integration provides a more complete conceptual tool kit for understanding changes in life direction than either perspective on its own. However, there are also significant variations in the relative salience of these processes—within samples, across different types of samples, or between different historical contexts. We developed our ideas about the importance of cognitive processes and the role of “agentic moves” primarily through analyses of one set of contemporary qualitative data. A preliminary discussion of these notions (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 1997) was,

in the venerable tradition of symbolic interactionism, largely free of any consideration of the broader structural underpinnings of the collected and analyzed material. But while we continue to focus primarily on microlevel processes, we have increasingly recognized that the form and content of these narratives intimately connect to the social addresses of our respondents. Thus, their discourse (and inferentially the character of their change efforts) necessarily draws on themes that are within the reach of highly marginal women and men attempting to navigate the specific conditions and challenges of a late-20th-century environment.

For individuals, samples, or eras characterized by greater advantage, perhaps the kinds of agentic moves we will emphasize may not have been necessary (when things really do just tend to fall into place). In contrast, our respondents' frequent descriptions of efforts to, in effect, pull themselves up by their own cognitive "bootstraps" likely connect to the reality that society has provided them with little in the way of raw materials (i.e., structure). Feminist perspectives on agency and the broader literature on structure-agency connections are useful correctives in this regard. We believe our research contributes to these traditions as well; feminist theories increasingly take into account the intersection or confluence of various kinds of disadvantage. The literature, however, contains a relatively small number of longitudinal studies of women so positioned. Similarly, the sociological literature contains numerous theoretical or formal discussions of the place of agency but fewer empirical investigations that work directly with this elusive but important construct.

## BACKGROUND

In a series of analyses that rely on data originally collected by Glueck and Glueck (1968), Sampson and Laub (1993) documented that childhood predictors (e.g., early family experiences) failed to effectively distinguish male desisters from those who continued to offend in their adult years. However, variables indexing the strength of adult social bonds (notably, job stability and strong bonds of attachment to a partner) were found to be important. In a recent dynamic analysis, Laub et al. (1998) demonstrated that the good marriage effect tends to be gradual and cumulative rather than abrupt, and they further articulated a control theory explanation of these findings. Their analyses also lend support to the notion that the differences in marital quality of desisters cannot be explained entirely by initial differences between groups of men (i.e., by selection effects), although this issue has been the source of controversy (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). Farrington and West (1995) also concluded that while the high-risk London boys they followed into adulthood were more likely

than conforming boys to experience marital difficulties and instability, a stable marriage was nevertheless related to a pattern of adult conformity.

Horney, Osgood, and Marshall (1995) examined the patterning of offense involvement of recently convicted felons, using a shorter window of time, that is, month-to-month changes in the year following their release. They found that changes in levels of involvement are tied to variations in "local life circumstances," including living with a wife. Additionally, they note the compatibility of their findings with Sampson and Laub's social control perspective and also with basic tenets of rational-choice or routine-activities theory. They conclude that living with a spouse may give one "more to lose," or increase shame "when the reactions of a significant other are considered," which may in turn "serve to reconfigure the costs and benefits of crime" (see also Shover and Thompson 1992, p. 670). They argue further that living with a wife may significantly influence the nature of daily activities, suggesting that these lifestyle changes may also work to limit involvement in illegal behavior. Warr (1998), in a recent analysis of National Youth Survey data, found support for this hypothesis by demonstrating that at least some of the marriage effect was indirect, via the spouse's role in reducing involvement with delinquent peers. (For a recent comprehensive review and critique of the desistance literature, see Laub and Sampson [2001]).

#### Gender Issues

While the above studies differ in etiological emphasis, they coalesce around the idea that marriage matters, at least for male offenders (see especially Waite [1995] and Waite and Gallagher [2000] for more general treatments of this axiom). However, no comparable prospective follow-ups examine the influence of marriage, employment, or other factors on young women's levels of criminal activity. One reason little is known about female-offender behavior over time is that traditional longitudinal studies, including unselected cohort designs or even a national probability sample (Elliott, Huizinga, and Menard 1989; Osgood et al. 1988), do not include sufficiently large numbers of seriously delinquent girls to provide for a comprehensive analysis. For example, Stattin, Magnusson, and Reichel (1989) found in a follow-up of 1,393 pupils in Sweden that only 15 females had an official crime record as juveniles, while 165 males were convicted of at least one offense prior to age 18. Similarly, Wolfgang, Thornberry, and Figlio (1987) reported that only 1.9% of the females in their large cohort study had committed a violent offense resulting in injury to a victim.

Such findings underscore that gender socialization is, in the typical case, very powerful indeed. Female adolescents, on average, are just not likely

to be very delinquent, particularly in comparison to their male counterparts. However, this does make it difficult to study the persistence or desistance of criminal careers that have never really “taken off” in the first place. Random sampling strategies almost necessarily place emphasis on the degree to which females either conform or engage in different “styles of pathology,” where distress is internalized rather than externalized (Horwitz and White 1987; Robbins 1989). But a small number of girls in every jurisdiction do engage in delinquent, aggressive, or antisocial behavior, and thereby become engaged in the juvenile and adult correctional systems. Indeed, recent Bureau of Justice statistics indicate that the number of females incarcerated in state and federal prison facilities “grew at nearly double the rate of males” (Gilliard and Beck 1998, p. 5). Yet we know remarkably little about the long-term prospects of such young women.

Warren and Rosenbaum (1986) completed a longitudinal study of 159 females incarcerated as adolescents and, while their adult follow-up data were limited to an examination of official records, found evidence of criminal continuity (i.e., a high percentage of the adolescents in their study later went on to be arrested as adults). Robins’s (1966) follow-up of girls (as well as boys) seen at a psychiatric clinic for antisocial behavior in childhood or adolescence also documented that many of the women exhibited behavioral and mental health difficulties in adulthood. Neither of these two follow-ups, however, explored factors associated with variability in the success of the women’s adult transitions.

Despite the dearth of longitudinal studies, a growing body of research has focused on initial causes of female delinquency. In this literature, contradictory themes and images coexist about the nature of young women’s involvement in crimes and about whether theories designed to explain male delinquency are appropriate for theory-building in this area. Some researchers emphasize that even when females engage in delinquent behaviors, their involvement is likely to be of a less serious nature. It is argued that they typically commit relatively petty crimes such as shoplifting or running away; or, when caught up in more serious crimes, their level of participation is assumed to be minor and their motivations are believed to be different (Leonard 1982). This idea of distinct causes and patterns is exemplified by research that focuses on linkages between women’s experiences of victimization and their patterns of offending. For example, early sexual abuse is considered a more significant risk factor in the etiology of female than male criminality (Chesney-Lind and Shelden 1998). Contemporary research has also focused more attention on context (i.e., circumstances, motives, and women’s roles in crime) in a way that highlights gender differences (see, e.g., Daly 1994; Maher 1997; Maher and Daly 1996; Ogle, Maier-Katkin, and Bernard 1995; Triplett and Myers 1995). Although this literature does not address desistance processes

specifically, the notion that there may be gendered pathways into crime leads us to assume that there could be gendered pathways out of crime as well.

Literature focusing on the gender gap in criminal activity, and the more voluminous body of gender studies, also provides a basis for positing distinct patterns. Both literatures emphasize that women, compared to men, have closer relationships to family and the domestic sphere, a greater tendency to derive status from marital partners, and less power/success in occupational arenas (see, e.g., Bernard 1982; Leonard 1982; Rossi 1998). Thus we might expect that (1) marital attachment may be even more critical as an influence on desistance for women than for men, (2) child-bearing may represent a more life-changing transition for female than for male offenders, and (3) employment experiences will tend to be less important for women than for men.

However, another tradition within criminology demonstrates that some social processes linked with male delinquency are helpful in understanding young women's involvement. Economic disadvantage (Giordano, Kerbel, and Dudley 1981; Miller 1998), family factors—including lack of supervision (Canter 1982; Cernkovich and Giordano 1987)—school failure (Smith and Paternoster 1987), and association with delinquent peers (Cairns and Cairns 1994; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Pugh 1986) have all been significantly related to female as well as male delinquency. Similarly, Baskin and Sommers (1998) interviewed 30 women who had desisted from crime and found the reasons women gave for “maturing out” were similar to those found in studies of male offenders. Also, Uggen and Kruttschnitt (1998) analyzed data over a three-year time span and found similarities in the factors associated with self-reports of desistance among male and female ex-offenders.

Nevertheless, there is research that documents significant gender differences in the relative salience of certain predictors, as well as in mechanisms of influence. For example, while peer involvement is an important element for both female and male delinquency, female adolescents are more likely to commit delinquent acts with a mixed-gender group, while males are typically accompanied by same-gender companions (Giordano and Cernkovich 1979). More recently, Heimer and DeCoster (1999) found that low supervision by family was significantly related to male self-reports of involvement in violent behavior while more subtle indirect familial controls influenced levels of female involvement. We might also expect gender differences in the magnitude of some effects and in the mechanisms through which certain variables exert an influence. For example, Uggen and Kruttschnitt (1998) found evidence of gender effects when the dependent variable was arrest history rather than self-reports. In a study of British offenders, Graham and Bowling (1996) found that



desistance occurred more abruptly for women than men and was often linked to the birth of a child. In addition, while a factor such as marriage may be implicated in both female and male desistance, the ways in which partners influence each other may be quite distinct. It is also possible that processes not identified in previous male-centered studies are systematically related to variations in women's adult levels of involvement in criminal behavior.

Finally, feminist theorists have increasingly grappled with the ways in which gender may be linked with other bases of oppression and privilege, and this notion of intersectionalities is critically important to consider in the present context (Collins 2000; Hill and Sprague 1999; King 1988; Weber 1998). The unique position and concerns of minority women in particular have been highlighted, and the idea of distinctive standpoints has recently informed theoretical developments within the criminological literature as well (Schwartz and Milovanovic 1996; Simpson 2000). These related traditions suggest the importance of attention to the role of minority status along with gender in this study of desistance processes.

To summarize, research on the life course and criminal careers of female offenders is limited, and the theoretical underpinnings of the female crime literature are contradictory in several key respects. Our analyses will thus address four basic questions: (1) are factors such as strong bonds of marital attachment and job stability predictive of variation in transitions away from criminal involvement for women as well as for men, (2) how do the experiences associated with race/ethnicity as well as gender influence desistance processes, (3) what additional factors, not identified in previous research on male offenders, might help explain female patterns of continuity or desistance, and (4) what are the mechanisms through which the various factors such as marital attachment become associated with favorable adult outcomes?

The first two questions are relatively straightforward and can be addressed using quantitative data from structured interviews and from searches of police and prison records. With longitudinal data, predictors of desistance are assessed by regressing these adult measures of criminal involvement—collected in the second wave—on first-wave (adolescent) and second-wave (adult) social control variables (marital attachment and job stability). However, we also include in our models a childhood predictor (sexual abuse) and an adult status variable (a measure of attachment to one's child/children) that may be more salient for female offenders. We also introduce race/ethnicity as a predictor variable in order to test for race effects on desistance, as well as gender by race interactions. A final set of interactions examine the impact of the social control variables on desistance, in order to assess whether effects of marriage or job stability

vary as a function of respondent race or gender or for particular subgroups (e.g., African-American women).

To address the third and fourth research questions, we rely on the narrative histories elicited during the adult interviews. Qualitative approaches are especially useful for developing new conceptual categories or lines of inquiry (question three) and can provide a window on mechanisms/processes (question four) that may be more difficult to elucidate using traditional quantitative procedures (Abbott 1992; Maines 1993; Morse 1994). The narrative or life-story approach also positions us to highlight the actor's own assessments of the meaning and importance of various life events. Eliciting the perspectives of these young women offenders seems particularly important in light of the contradictory and incomplete images that can be derived from the existing literature. Finally, our analyses of these qualitative data have led us to a different overall perspective on desistance processes, one we wish to distinguish from a control approach. This provisional theory is best highlighted through a discussion of the narrative data and against the empirical backdrop the regression analyses provide. However, the following outline of our perspective will provide a general framework for both the quantitative and qualitative analyses that follow.

#### Toward a Theory of Cognitive Transformation

Evaluation of a social control theory of desistance raises issues of generalizability (e.g., does a good marriage effect operate for women offenders?), as well as of logical adequacy and comprehensiveness. In their emphasis on adult experiences, Sampson and Laub (1993) navigate an essential shift in the territory covered by criminological theories. The attempt to transport a theory typically used to explain juvenile behavior to the adult context works, but in our view it is not a perfect fit.

The exteriority/constraint assumptions of control theory seem generally appropriate to a focus on childhood and adolescence, phases of life that are defined by their dependency. But while young people inherit a world that in key respects is not of their own choosing, even the most circumscribed adult life is characterized by exposure to an ever-increasing number of experiences, others, and contexts.<sup>2</sup> The somewhat larger social and spatial arena of adulthood presents options that were not available earlier. In addition, adults, compared with children, have greater behavioral lee-

<sup>2</sup> We also agree with interpretive views of childhood and adolescence (i.e., the notion that the child is an active creator as well as a product of culture; see, e.g., Corsaro [1985]), but merely wish to call attention here to variations in the possibilities presented by each phase of the life course.

way, that is, ability to influence the specific course of action they will take. As Deitz and Burns (1992) note, a display of human agency requires the availability of at least some *choice* and some amount of *power* (what the individual does can make a difference), and these elements characterize the adult more than the juvenile phase of development.

Deitz and Burns (1992) also suggest, following Giddens (1984), that agency is associated with *intentional* and *reflective* actions. Here, reflexivity refers to the notion that the “actor has enough awareness of the effects of actions to monitor those effects and use information about the perceived effects to modify their rule system” (Deitz and Burns 1992, p. 192). These elements too seem more consistent with adult than juvenile (“hot-headed,” “reckless,” “callow”) proclivities and sensibilities. Thus, we assert that a thorough understanding of either female or male adult desistance likely requires that we theorize a more reciprocal relationship between actor and environment and reserve a central place for agency in the change process.<sup>3</sup>

Our theoretical emphasis seems well suited to a focus on adult development, but perhaps more important, it is suited to a study of significant changes in life direction. Chronic offenders who eventually desist from criminal involvement have by definition moved away from the familiar world their past behaviors represent. At a minimum, it is reasonable to assume that such actors will have a heightened awareness of having done so (see, e.g., Lawler’s [1999] description of the self-conscious qualities of narrative accounts of British women who significantly improved their social-class standing). However, we posit an even more essential link between cognitive and behavioral changes in our suggestion that “cognitive shifts” can be considered fundamental to the transformation process. This basic notion is quite consistent with the tenets of symbolic interaction—Mead’s brand of symbolic interaction in particular. Mead (1964) emphasized the social nature of mental processes and their connection to language and communication. But he also highlighted the individual’s creative capacities and underscored that selectivity of attention and foresight are distinctively human attributes:

The human animal is an attentive animal, and his attention may be given to stimuli that are relatively faint. One can pick out sounds at a distance. . . . Not only do we open the door to certain stimuli and close it to others, but our attention is an organizing process. . . . Our attention enables us to organize the field in which we are going to act. Here we have the organism as acting and determining its environment. It is not simply a set of passive

<sup>3</sup> For example, the initial movement toward a marital partner involves an agentic move in a way that “level of parental supervision,” a traditional control variable in juvenile delinquency studies, does not.

senses played upon by the stimuli that come from without. The organism goes out and determines what it is going to respond to and organizes that world. (Mead 1964, pp. 138–39)

The environment can thus provide a kind of scaffolding that makes possible the construction of significant life changes. Nonetheless, individuals themselves must attend to these new possibilities, discard old habits, and begin the process of crafting a different way of life. At the point of change, this new lifestyle will necessarily be “at a distance” or a “faint” possibility. Therefore, the individual’s subjective stance is especially important during the early stages of the change process. At a basic level, one must resonate with, move toward, or select the various catalysts for change.

We might refer to potentially prosocial features of the environment as catalysts, change agents, causes, or even turning points (Laub and Sampson 2001; Maruna 2001), but we prefer to call them “hooks for change” for two reasons. First, consistent with Mead’s notion of opening the door to certain stimuli and closing it to others, we wish to emphasize the actor’s own role in latching onto opportunities presented by the broader environment. Second, we recognize that actors’ accounts within a narrative or life history will not access the full array of influences that literally produced successful changes. Instead, like novels, situation comedies, or grant proposals, narratives (here, narratives of change) have hooks—shorthand ways to describe what seems essential from the communicator’s point of view. This linguistic selection process reflects (albeit imperfectly) and enlivens a set of cognitive representations. Linguistic and cognitive hooks are important to consider, for as Mead (1964) suggested, together they can serve as an organizing process that actually helps to push along the changes.

#### Types of Cognitive Transformations

Conceptually, we distinguish four types of intimately related cognitive transformations. The first, and arguably the most fundamental, is a shift in the actor’s basic openness to change. The importance of this readiness for change has been discussed extensively in various treatment literatures, especially those dealing with addictions (see, e.g., Boyle, Polinsky, and Hser 2000; De Leon et al. 1994; Miller 1985). Here we will simply note that this idea of a general cognitive openness needs to be distinguished conceptually from a related kind. The second type of cognitive shift relates more directly to one’s exposure to a particular hook or set of hooks for change (e.g., an increased recognition of the desirability of changing is conceptually distinct from an increased receptivity to the prospect of marriage). This type of cognitive transformation is central to our conceptual

emphasis because it focuses direct attention on the reciprocal relationship between actor and environment. That is, while a general openness to change seems necessary, by itself it is often insufficient. A fundamental premise is that both exposure to a hook and one's attitude toward it are important elements of successful change. In addition to externally manipulated shifts (e.g., actor is offered a job), then, we must consider that what changes may primarily involve either the hook's perceived availability and its meaning, salience, or importance for the individual.<sup>4</sup> The latter types of shifts are not, however, simply the result of individualistic mental processes. Instead, the hook for change can play an important role in fostering these very transformations. Eventually, as we discuss in more detail below, successful hooks will need to influence the actor to make a particular sort of cognitive connection, consistent with the idea of reflexivity described above. The actor must not only regard the new environmental situation as a positive development (e.g., experience high attachment to a spouse), but must also define the new state of affairs as fundamentally incompatible with continued deviation. We consider this more problematic (that is to say, subject to variability) than do control theorists, who have traditionally argued that prosocial actions flow naturally from strong attachments (Hirschi 1969).

An especially important feature of human consciousness explored by Mead (1964) is the ability to focus reflectively on the self. Thus, a third type of cognitive transformation occurs when actors are able to envision and begin to fashion an appealing and conventional "replacement self" that can supplant the marginal one that must be left behind. This can obviously facilitate the connecting tasks outlined above (to the degree that it becomes inappropriate for "someone like me" to do "something like that"), but the new identity can be considered a broader, more all-encompassing personal construct. If, as Mead suggested, cognitions serve as an organizing process, then identity provides a higher level of organization and coherence to one's cognitions. This involves more than a mental tidying up, because the new or refashioned identity can act as a cognitive filter for decision making. This filtering process is particularly critical as one moves into the future and inevitably encounters novel situations (Matsueda and Heimer 1997).

Unlike adults who have built up a relatively successful life course, chronic offenders can ill afford to draw on prior experiences and habits

<sup>4</sup> Uggen (2000) recently documented that older offenders who participated in a work program were more likely to desist from crime than were their younger counterparts. This finding is generally consistent with our basic premise that it is not simply the hook (in this case, a job and additional training/supervision), but some combination of availability and readiness that is most likely to produce a change in criminal involvement.

as they attempt to forge ahead. Hooks for change can provide an important opening in the direction of a new identity and concrete reinforcement during all phases of the transformation process. In some instances, the presence of the environmental stimulus is integral to the development of the replacement self (e.g., one's identity as a traditional wife requires a husband—ideally a correspondingly respectable one). A key point here is that the identity transformation potential presented by the various hooks for change needs to be distinguished conceptually from its qualities of control. While in practice these processes often coalesce, in the long run a solid replacement self may prove the stronger ally of sustained behavior change (e.g., as the actor encounters new situations outside of the spouse's purview, divorces a focal spouse, or experiences the loss of a particular job).

The fourth type of cognitive change (the capstone) involves a transformation in the way the actor views the deviant behavior or lifestyle itself. We assume that criminal/antisocial behaviors, like conforming actions, are imbued with meaning and significance (e.g., "aggression works" [Cairns 1979], stealing offers "sneaky thrills" [Katz 1988], and drugs and alcohol can be even more relentlessly seductive). Thus, the desistance process can be seen as relatively complete when the actor no longer sees these same behaviors as positive, viable, or even personally relevant. As stated earlier, this differs from a control position, where motivation to deviate is viewed as a relative constant, while it is the degree of control that is conceptualized as varying significantly.

Our fundamental premise is that the various cognitive transformations not only relate to one another (an ideal typical sequence: an overall "readiness" influences receptivity to one or more hooks for change, hooks influence the shift in identity, and identity changes gradually decrease the desirability and salience of the deviant behavior), but they also inspire and direct behavior.<sup>5</sup> Actions that flow from these cognitive shifts, and

<sup>5</sup> Mead (1913, p. 378) discussed issues of timing explicitly. He argued that as changes begin to occur, a new self is not likely to emerge at the outset. Problems in the environment appear first: "When, however, an essential problem appears, there is some disintegration in this organization, and different tendencies appear in reflective thought as different voices in conflict with each other. In a sense the old self has disintegrated, and out of the moral process a new self arises. There is of course a reciprocal relation between the self and its object. . . . On the other hand, the consciousness of the new object, its values and meaning, seems to come earlier to consciousness than the new self that answers to the new object." The problem in the present context is not the respondent's difficulties with the law, for these have appeared as a regular pattern across the life course. Mead (1913, p. 378) noted that "as a mere organization of habit, the self is not self-conscious." The problem occurs when the environment comes to include a catalyst for change and the actor recognizes it as such. This has the potential to further heighten an actor's "reflective thoughts" and to provide a framework for

that cannot be explained solely with reference to predictor effects (e.g., where the spouse forces the actor to discard bad companions), we consider agentic moves. Both cognitive shifts and the agentic moves that connect to them will be associated with sustained behavioral change.<sup>6</sup>

### Links to Structure

Our emphasis on cognitions and human agency necessarily draws attention to the individual. That the actor creatively and selectively draws on elements of the environment in order to affect significant life changes seems a developmentally appropriate correction to a conception of desistance as a feat accomplished largely by the spouse or as a process set in motion by job conditions. Mead's (1964) view of mind and self as fundamentally social in origin in turn serves to anchor this more interpretive, self-conscious take on desistance within the realm of basic social processes. Nevertheless, the traditional symbolic-interactionist focus on the actor's immediate social world has itself been justifiably criticized for unrealistically bracketing off the broader social forces that give shape and form to these interactions (Perinbanayagam 1985; Stryker 1980).

While this has been a standard critique of symbolic interaction, it is also a central point of debate within more general discussions of structure-agency connections (Baber 1991; Giddens 1984; Rachlin 1991). As Deacon and Mann (1999) put it, while actors can be said to have choices, "that does not mean that such choices are free floating of any structural restraints, but rather that some other option existed, albeit also restrained" (p. 413). Roseneil (1995) recently argued that an index of feminist sociology's maturity as a discipline is that agency has garnered increased attention ("we need to theorize agency as well as repression, resistance as well as domination" [p. 201]). However, scholars such as Davies (1991) emphasize the considerable limitations of an individualistic view of agency as a process of, in effect, rising up against existing structural arrangements. She believes this presents a false dualism and promotes the misguided

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the construction of a new kind of lifestyle, and [in time] a new kind of self. We are in agreement with Mead's ideas about sequencing but would add that even in the early stages (in order to get things moving) an alternative view of self must at least be in awareness as a worthy hypothetical (extending Mead's notion about the human capacity to fix on objects that are "relatively faint" [or] "at a distance" [Mead 1964, p. 138]).

<sup>6</sup> Maruna's (2001) recent study of British persisters and desisters is in general quite compatible with the approach we describe here (see also Farrall and Bowling 1999). Laub and Sampson have also focused attention on the role of human agency (see especially Laub and Sampson 2001), but these insights have not been fully incorporated into their theory of informal social control and associated empirical assessments (e.g., Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998).

notion that the “individual is precisely that which the collective is not” (Davies 1991, p. 43). Instead, she articulates a feminist poststructuralist position, recognizing that “The individual is constituted through the discourses of a number of collectives as is the collective itself. One can only ever be what the various discourses make possible, and one’s being shifts with the various discourses through which one is spoken into existence” (Davies 1991, p. 43).

In a similar vein, Smith (1999) argues that Mead’s emphasis on the phenomenological world of face-to-face interaction is ultimately limiting because it does not take into account the broader social and institutional origins of these various discourses. She highlights Bakhtin’s theory of language as a useful counterpoint, noting that his conception centers on the “active interplay between past determinations of meaning and their creative shaping to the speaker’s or writer’s current intentions” (Bakhtin [1981, p. 271] as described by Smith [1999, p. 113]). Thus, while unfolding in particular social setting (as Mead implies), language has “meaning given determination prior to any particular local interaction”; hence, it plays “a powerful role in the local organization of the social” (Smith 1999, p. 98).

This adds an important layer of complication of Mead’s original conception—one that is critical to consider here given our analytic focus on the discourse contained within respondents’ narrative accounts. Both the ways in which respondents describe and actually accomplish (or fail to accomplish) life changes depends heavily on the particular repertoires (cognitive, linguistic, behavioral) to which they have access. Thus, actors make moves, but they do so within bounded territory, and a specific nexus of opportunities and constraints (as women, as highly disadvantaged offenders, as minorities, as inhabitants of a late-20th-century environment, as all of these positions). In this article, we cannot hope to forge links to all of the structural and cultural forces that have influenced the character of our respondents’ “desistance talk.” However, the quantitative findings themselves (and in particular the contrast between our findings and those derived from analyses of the Gluecks’ follow-up data) do provide a window on basic structural realities that undoubtedly connect to what actors include and leave out of their narratives. Our “theory of cognitive transformation,” then, may have some general utility, to the degree that it provides more specificity about mechanisms of change. But we would argue that the perspective has a particularly good fit with the life course experiences and change efforts of contemporary serious female (and more provisionally) male offenders.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> A number of sociologists (e.g., Elder 1998; Elder et al. 1993) have repeatedly directed attention to the impact of historical context on basic social processes and the ways in which events unfold across the life course. Extending this basic notion, an argument



## DATA AND METHODS

## Sample

In 1982, we conducted 127 interviews with the entire population of the only state-level institution for delinquent girls in Ohio; a comparable sample was drawn from the populations of three institutions for males ( $N = 127$ ). This work was originally an adjunct to a larger neighborhood study of Toledo youth ( $N = 942$ ) we completed the same year. Because of our specific interest in female delinquency, we were concerned that the neighborhood sample might not contain a sufficient number of females with significant levels of involvement in delinquent behavior. An analysis of self-report data indicated that the female and male respondents in the institutional sample were significantly more delinquent not only in comparison to the average neighborhood respondent, but also when compared to the most delinquent youth in the neighborhood survey.<sup>8</sup> Laub and Sampson (2001) recently stressed the importance of studying desistance “among those who reach some reasonable threshold of frequent and serious criminal offending” (p. 12). We agree with this assessment and note that our sample selection criterion (time spent in a state-level correctional facility) is similar to that used by the Gluecks.<sup>9</sup>

In 1995, we attempted to locate and interview all of the respondents who had participated in the adolescent interview.<sup>10</sup> Given the lack of communication over the years between interview waves, the marginal and shifting nature of many living arrangements, and a general wariness about being contacted by anyone (e.g., some had open warrants for their arrest, others were dodging debt collectors, etc.), we were gratified by a completion rate of 85% of the first-wave respondents presumed to be alive in 1995 (six were known to be deceased). The substantial majority of interviews (91%) were face-to-face. Mailed questionnaires were completed

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can be made that sociological theories themselves are more closely tied to particular historical circumstances than we generally like to believe.

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed description of the nature and extent of the self-reported offense involvement of the original sample of male and female respondents, see Cernkovich, Giordano, and Pugh (1985).

<sup>9</sup> The first wave of data collection occurred after legislation had been enacted that diverted status offenders from the state institutional system; thus all of these young women and men were placed in institutions because of violations that were more serious than status offenses.

<sup>10</sup> We began with names and 1982 addresses of the respondents who had originally resided in cities and towns throughout the state, along with those of two contact persons the young people had provided to us at the end of the first-wave interviews. This phase of the project involved extensive phone and street tracking of relatives, previous neighbors and friends, and searches of a variety of databases (e.g., Bureau of Motor Vehicles, the military). In addition, police and adult corrections officials often provided helpful leads about individuals who continued to have contacts with law enforcement.

by respondents who lived in distant states and by four inmates who were imprisoned in distant locations. It was also necessary to obtain permission to enter and interview within 25 different prison settings, where a total of 44 interviews (12 female, 32 male) took place. Outright refusals were low (four), with the majority of the nonresponse due to an inability to locate ( $N = 29$ ). The final sample of those reinterviewed was 48% white (109 females, 101 males) and 37% nonwhite. Of the nonwhites, the majority (84%) were African-American. Due to the small number in the other race category ( $N = 13$ ), these cases were omitted from the statistical analyses, but are included in our analysis and presentation of the qualitative data. The mean age of the women was slightly older than that of the male respondents (29.63 vs. 28.93), and a higher percentage of the women were African-American (37.5% vs. 28%). A logistic regression analysis (not shown here) comparing those interviewed and not interviewed revealed no significant differences by race, time-1 delinquency level, age, or gender.

#### Dependent Variables

*Criminal involvement.*—Involvement in crime at time 2 was measured by a modified version of Elliot and Ageton's (1980) self-reported delinquency scale. This scale indexes the respondent's report of level of involvement in property and violent crimes, as well as drug and alcohol use during the past year. Items were deleted that would have been inappropriate for this adult sample (i.e., status offenses), and each offense item was also assigned a ratio-score seriousness weight derived from the National Survey of Crime Severity (Wolfgang et al. 1985, pp. 46–50), ranging from 1.42 for drug use to 25.85 for rape ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

*Arrest history.*—Another traditional index of desistance is arrest history. We conducted searches of all the jurisdictions in which respondents were known to have resided and also obtained data about incarceration histories from the Ohio State Department of Rehabilitation and Correction. For this dichotomous variable, individuals were considered to be desisters (and coded as "0") if we did not have any information about arrests (other than traffic-related) for at least a two-year period prior to the interview.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> We recognize the somewhat arbitrary nature of this cutoff. It is quite possible that the absence of arrests represents for some merely a temporary lull, rather than a permanent shift to a more conforming status. In addition, the lack of a centralized record system in the state made this search process quite cumbersome. In some cases, we may have had incomplete information regarding respondents' movements over the 13-year interval between data collection periods, and some individuals may have offended in areas other than where they resided. This would have the effect of underrepresenting to an unknown extent the total amount of criminal involvement of these respondents.

Because of the various biases that may have influenced the arrest data, we will concentrate primarily on the self-report index in the analyses below. We briefly describe results of the logistic regressions that used arrest status as the dependent variable, and we note the similarity in findings across the two types of data.

### Independent Variables

Although our primary interest in these analyses is in the effect of adult social bonding/control variables, consistent with prior work (e.g., Sampson and Laub 1993), we also examine the impact of time-1 predictors. We patterned these analyses after those of Sampson and Laub and include measures of differences in family background, including parents' socio-economic status, family size, attachment to parents, level of supervision, and experience of childhood sexual or physical abuse. We also incorporate adolescent behavior indices, including first-wave self-reported delinquency, school commitment, and school achievement (as measured by grades). (See the appendix for a complete description of these time-1 predictors).

The key adult social control variables include a measure of job stability, attachment to spouse, and attachment to child(ren). The measure of job stability was derived from three questions assessing whether or not the respondent was currently employed full-time and indicated a low likelihood that they would either lose or quit their job within the next two years. Respondents were categorized as having high job stability (and coded "2") if they were currently employed full-time and had a low likelihood of quitting/losing the job. A middle category (coded as "1") consisted of individuals who were employed full-time but thought that they might either lose their position or quit within the next two years. Respondents who did not have full-time employment or were not currently employed were categorized as having low job stability and coded "0." Attachment to spouse/partners was assessed with a five-item scale that included a mix of positively and negatively worded items regarding the nature of the respondent's relationship with spouse or partner: (1) I'm closer to my spouse/partner than most people are to theirs; (2) He/she gives me the right amount of affection; (3) He/she seems to wish I were a different type of person; (4) He/she sometimes puts me down in front of other people; and (5) He sometimes won't listen to me or my opinions. Alpha reliability for this scale is 0.74. Attachment to child(ren) was a likert item that asked how much respondents agreed or disagreed with the following statement: "I'm closer to my kid(s) than a lot of people my age are to theirs." Answers range from "0" to "5," with respondents who did not have children coded as "0" and a high score indicating a high level of attachment.

Eliciting and Analyzing the Qualitative Data

We elicited open-ended life history narratives from 97 women and 83 men in the sample. The narratives consist of tape-recorded interviews conducted immediately following the completed structured protocol during the second wave.<sup>12</sup> These and accompanying interviewer observations were subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Starting with a set of broad questions, the interviewers elicited detailed retrospective histories that included information, stories, and vignettes relating to the childhood, adolescent, and adult years of the respondents. Although necessarily varying in wider content, all were asked a direct question about the extent of their current involvement in criminal behavior: "Would you say that the overall amount that you do things that could get you in trouble with the law is about the same, more, or less than when you were interviewed back in 1982?" This was followed up with: "Why do you think that is?" The respondent's own behavior in adolescence (at time 1) was the primary reference point for assessing progress in desisting from crime, however, the interviews produced other useful comparisons as well. These included reflections on and comparisons to the behavior of the respondents' own parents and siblings, partners, neighborhood acquaintances, and current friends. Statements about respondents' friends from their adolescent years were especially helpful for comparison purposes.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Potter and Wetherell (1987) note that the process of eliciting a detailed life story can be considered a kind of "craft skill," and we came to rely heavily on a small group of individuals who excelled at this type of interviewing. The basic structure of the open-ended portion of the interviews was pretested with nine adult women and men we interviewed in connection with a related follow-up study of neighborhood youth (see, e.g., Cernkovich, Giordano, and Rudolph 2000), including three women from that sample who were incarcerated.

<sup>13</sup> At the time of the adolescent interviews, we had recorded the first names, nicknames, or initials of each of the friends they "hung around with," and our initial open-ended question referenced these individuals. Specifically, they were asked whether they still were friends with them and if they knew how they were doing. This proved a useful strategy because it was a way of verifying for the respondents that we had indeed interviewed them previously (most had forgotten this), and it was a relatively non-threatening warm-up to the interview. Moreover, the way in which the respondents depicted the subsequent lives of their friends in adolescence was helpful in interpreting claims about the degree of reform or respectability that characterized their own lives. Below is an example. (Note that we have numbered the respondents included in this article consecutively. In addition, as respondents are initially introduced into our discussion, we include basic demographic, marital, and employment data about them. This should allow the reader to gauge the number of different "voices" reflected in the discussion of these narratives, and it will at least in some measure, situate their responses).

*Respondent 1.*—"I have chosen to grow up, keep a job, keep a home, stay out of trouble, given up the drugs and alcohol, and raise my son; and the rest of them are

Since the study as originally designed had a strong social network emphasis, other broad follow-up questions often focused on significant others, either as sources of positive or negative influence. These included references to spouse or romantic partner, family of origin, peers, and children. Thus, it is not surprising that the narratives contain many references to these social domains. However, we developed new conceptual categories from themes respondents brought up without any degree of prompting by interviewers (e.g., statements indicating radical religious transformations). Moreover, our focus on agency and cognition emerged gradually and almost entirely from our exposure to these qualitative data. This is an important consideration. Since we had no prior theoretical interest in these issues; did not include any questions that related to cognitions, identity, or agency in our protocol; and had not trained interviewers to elicit this type of content, we are comfortable that our theoretical emphases here reflect the data well.<sup>14</sup>

In outlining a general set of observations about desistance processes, we focus primarily on the narratives of the women rather than the men. Given the lack of longitudinal data on female offenders, this emphasis seems appropriate. Our comparisons of the narratives across gender did point to significant areas of overlap, and we have included some quotes from male respondents as a way of suggesting that the process described also appeared to have some relevance for understanding male offenders' change efforts. But while we thus describe a general set of observations about mechanisms involved in desistance, throughout the course of this

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still, you know, floating around, drinking, losing homes, not working" (28-year-old white female, never married, employed full-time, \$14,700 a year).

<sup>14</sup> Another issue relates to the correspondence between the respondents' narrated representations and emphases and some externally verifiable reality. Scholars with interests in the narrative often bracket off concerns about external validity and emphasize that all stories involve some degree of selectivity and shaping (Neisser 1994). This research tradition has been helpful in orienting us to the importance of narrative materials as worthy objects of inquiry in their own right (e.g., Derrida's influential declaration that "there is nothing outside the text" [1976, p. 158]). We have thus found it very useful to focus on respondents' discourse, but do recognize the distinction between "change talk" and behavioral change itself. While focusing primarily on the texts, we never completely abandoned our concern with events beyond the story line. For example, a story of change delivered from the basement of a crackhouse or a lawyer's cubicle in prison will necessarily be read differently than one produced by a respondent who has recently come home from work. In addition, many ordinary citizens, family members, and parole boards have a keen interest in whether respondents' notions about change will stand the test of time. Thus the level of correspondence between respondents' stories about the changes they had made and external measures of desistance (e.g., police records) continued to be one, but not the only, area of interest as we worked with these materials. Similarly, while respondents create their own "variance explained," regarding the relative importance of certain catalysts for change, we recognize that this too bears an imperfect relationship to externally verifiable events.

longitudinal study, we have undoubtedly focused more of our interest/attention on the lives of the women respondents. Therefore, we are most confident that our theory “works” as an explanation of the change efforts of serious female offenders and remain more cautious about applicability to males.

Within our discussion, we also point to specific areas where future research (using larger, more heterogeneous samples) may bring to light more clear-cut gender differences. For example, while the various hooks for change we outline can be found in both male and female narratives, we observed some gender differences in their frequency and apparent prominence. Independent raters evaluated and coded each narrative as to the dominance of particular hooks for change contained within them, and we offer the results of these counts (by gender) as modest leads in this regard.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps more important for future theory-building, we describe instances in which the use of even an identical discourse can link to distinctive (that is gendered) meanings and foster different life course consequences. We indicate how some social dynamics that in the abstract can be said to have general applicability, in everyday practical terms tend to influence male and female offenders differently. We develop this idea in our discussion of marriage as a hook for change, where we find the most compelling evidence of gendered processes.

#### FINDINGS: QUANTITATIVE DATA

Table 1 presents the results of a series of analyses in which adult self-reported criminal involvement was sequentially regressed on the demographic variables (model 1), the adolescent family variables (model 2), the adolescent behavior indices (model 3), and the adult social control variables (model 4). A final model (not shown) included interaction terms in order to determine whether the adult social control variables have a dif-

<sup>15</sup> Three raters examined self-report, arrest, and narrative data and classified individuals as either desisters, individuals making progress, or persisters. Using the first two categories of respondent narratives, raters then attempted to extract from the life history account the respondent’s view of the most important catalyst for changes they had made. Typically, a variety of influences were discussed, but statements such as *but most of all it was . . .* or other descriptors were used to identify prominence. The raters initially assigned prominence to the same hook for change in 84% of the cases, and subsequently reconciled discrepancies through additional study and discussion of the case. In some cases, individuals were placed in more than one category, where a most prominent hook could not be determined. These percentage data should be viewed with caution and are presented to give the reader a very basic sense of the weight of the factors within the women and men’s narratives.

TABLE 1  
ADULT SELF-REPORT OF CRIMINAL INVOLVEMENT REGRESSED ON ADOLESCENT AND  
ADULT VARIABLES

	ADULT CRIMINAL INVOLVEMENT				
	1	2	3	4	5
Sociodemographic variables:					
Age .....	-.04	-.04	-.04	-.03	-.002
Gender (female = 1) .....	-.18**	-.20**	-.18*	-.18*	-.61
Race (African-American = 1) .....	.31***	.29***	.32***	.30***	.41***
Family background:					
Parents' socioeconomic status .....		-.001	.05	.05	.08
Family size .....		.11	.10	.11	.09
Physical abuse .....		.08	.06	.07	.05
Sexual abuse .....		.05	.03	.03	.04
Parental supervision .....		-.02	-.01	.004	.0003
Attachment to family .....		-.04	-.05	-.04	-.06
Adolescent attitudes and behavior:					
Self-reported delinquency .....			.17*	.17*	.18**
Attachment to school .....			.06	.06	.08
School achievement (grades) .....			-.02	-.02	-.04
Adult social bonds:					
Job stability .....				-.07	-.17
Attachment to children .....				-.11	-.04
Attachment to spouse .....				-.05	-.21
Gender × race .....					-.14
Gender × job stability .....					.16
Gender × attachment to children ...					-.14
Gender × attachment to spouse .....					.51
F .....	8.93***	3.61***	3.26***	2.94***	2.74***
R <sup>2</sup> .....	.11	.11	.12	.13	.14

NOTE.—Standardized regression coefficients are presented.  $N = 197$ .

\*  $P \leq .05$ .

\*\*  $P \leq .01$ .

\*\*\*  $P \leq .001$ .

ferential impact based on respondent gender or race or for particular race/gender subgroups (e.g., African-American women).

Table 1 indicates that minority status is associated with higher levels of adult self-reported involvement in criminal activity. This finding is of substantive interest, given that previous follow-up studies of delinquents have focused primarily on white respondents. Model 1 shows that gender is also a significant predictor—men self-report more criminal involvement at the time of the adult follow-up. The findings described in model 2 are consistent with previous research; family differences measured at time 1 are not significant predictors of adult self-reports of criminal activity. Similarly, as shown in model 3, delinquency is the only behavioral index that is significantly related to adult level of criminal involvement. Model

4 presents the results of the regression of criminal involvement on the adult social control variables and documents that the effects of the bonding measures are all in the direction predicted by Sampson and Laub's theory of informal social control. However, neither the job stability variable nor two measures of attachment (to spouse, to children) achieve significance as predictors of adult levels of self-reported criminality.

A final model (not shown) included the interaction of the adult social control variables by respondent gender (gender  $\times$  job stability, gender  $\times$  attachment to spouse, gender  $\times$  attachment to children) as well as a race  $\times$  gender interaction term. These coefficients are not significant and do not contribute to the fit of the model. The lack of a significant race by gender interaction suggests that any effect of race on the likelihood of desistance is not conditional on respondent gender. The other results indicate that the effects of the social control variables appeared to be similarly limited for women as well as men. We also examined the interactions of race and the various control measures (race  $\times$  job stability, race  $\times$  attachment to spouse, race  $\times$  attachment to children), and these coefficients are not statistically significant. Finally, three-way interactions were introduced and provided a test for differential effects of social control (race  $\times$  gender  $\times$  each of the bonding measures) for specific subgroups. The three-way interactions did not achieve statistical significance.

We next turned to our arrest data and estimated similar models. The results (not shown) are strikingly similar. The adult social control variables were again consistently in the direction predicted by Sampson and Laub's control theory but did not emerge as statistically significant predictors of the odds of desisting when this was defined as the absence of recent official arrests. Also generally consistent with table 1, race/ethnicity and time-1 adolescent delinquency level were significant predictors. Furthermore, the interaction terms indicate no gender or race differences in the effects of the adult social control variables on the likelihood of recent arrests, and the three-way interactions were not significant. Overall, then, we conclude from this analysis that subjective measures of attachment to a spouse/partner and job stability are not strong predictors of desistance within the context of this contemporary sample of serious adolescent female and male offenders.

How do we explain this pattern of results? First, our sample size is modest, and thus statistical power is an important consideration.<sup>16</sup> In

<sup>16</sup> One reviewer noted that in a model with 10 other predictors and only 197 cases, it is not surprising that these coefficients are not significant. We also included these two variables in a model that contained only the three demographic controls, and these coefficients were similarly not significant. However, we are in agreement with the reviewer's basic point that it is more appropriate, given the constraints of sample size, to focus on the magnitude of effects rather than their statistical significance.



addition, our attachment and job stability measures are undoubtedly more limited than the composite assessments used in the Gluecks' (1968) study and Sampson and Laub's (1993) analyses. However, we do not believe that these results are entirely an artifact of our measurement approach.<sup>17</sup> Our use of subjective measures of adult bonds is consistent with the basic tenets of a social control perspective, but we would suggest that this has the effect of obscuring some fundamental differences between our offenders' life circumstances and those described in previous studies (see especially Farrington and West 1995; Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998; Sampson and Laub 1993). As mentioned above, Sampson and Laub argued that it is not marriage or a job per se but the quality of these experiences that is associated with desistance from crime. However, 66% of the men in the Gluecks' (1968) sample were in fact married by the age 31 follow-up period as contrasted with only 27% of the women and 24% of the men in the present sample. Although we cannot directly examine cohort effects, temporal changes in the likelihood, stability, and meaning of marriage may be an important subtext of our table 1 findings. Recent decades have witnessed a significant postponement of marriage coupled with higher rates of divorce and remarriage (Cherlin 1992). The much higher prevalence of cohabitation and greater instability of cohabiting unions may also be involved (Booth, Crouter, and Shanahan 1999; Seltzer 2000; White 1999).<sup>18</sup> And as researchers such as Edin (2000) have pointed out, these demographic and social trends tend to disproportionately influence lower-status and minority individuals.

Changes have also occurred in the nature and availability of jobs for those with low levels of education and few technical skills (Laub and Sampson 2001; Wilson 1996). A majority of respondents in our sample resided in households with total incomes below the 1995 poverty line (\$14,000 for a family of four), and most of those employed earn "under the table" wages. The solid manufacturing jobs that may have been associated with desistance for the men composing the Gluecks' sample are not generally part of the economic landscape these respondents have inhabited.

It is also important to consider that the bonding and social control potential of marriage and a stable job are likely maximized when these occur together as a relatively complete "respectability package." While it appears that a large percentage of the Gluecks' respondents were both married *and* held a full-time job, the data shown in table 2 document the

<sup>17</sup> We also recalculated the regression using two other measures of marital attachment, including an overall index of marital satisfaction and a single-item indicator of marital happiness, and the results do not differ.

<sup>18</sup> Of the sample, 92% report prior or current cohabitation experience.

TABLE 2  
ACCESS TO THE TRADITIONAL RESPECTABILITY PACKAGE (MARRIAGE AND FULL-TIME EMPLOYMENT) AND %DESISTING IN EACH CATEGORY

	GENDER			RACE		GENDER-RACE SUBGROUPS			
	Total	Female	Male	African-American	White	African-American Females	African-American Males	White Females	White Males
Complete "high-quality" package* ...	8.1 (50.6)	7.7 (49.4)	8.6 (50.0)	3.1 (100.0)	10.6 (42.5)	5.1 (100.0)	.0 (.0)	9.2 (33.7)	11.9 (50.4)
Complete package (married, employed) .....	8.1 (37.0)	5.8 (82.8)	10.8 (10.2)	6.2 (50.0)	9.1 (33.0)	5.1 (51.0)	7.7 (49.4)	6.2 (100.0)	11.9 (.0)
Gendered package females only (married, husband employed) ...	4.6 (65.2)	8.7 (66.7)	...	3.1 (48.4)	5.3 (71.7)	5.1 (51.0)	...	10.8 (71.3)	...
Partial package:									
Married, unemployed .....	5.6 (35.7)	5.8 (65.5)	5.4 (.0)	3.1 (.0)	6.8 (44.1)	5.1 (.0)	.0 (.0)	6.2 (100.0)	7.5 (.0)
Unmarried, employed .....	32.0 (12.8)	19.2 (30.2)	46.2 (4.8)	27.7 (.0)	34.1 (17.9)	12.8 (.0)	50.0 (.0)	23.1 (39.8)	44.8 (6.7)
No elements of package (unmarried, unemployed) .....	41.6 (17.1)	52.9 (23.6)	29.0 (3.8)	56.9 (16.2)	34.1 (17.9)	66.7 (23.1)	42.3 (.0)	44.6 (24.2)	23.9 (6.3)
N .....	197	104	93	65	132	39	26	65	67

NOTE.—Percentages are shown.

\* Respondents who report an average or better level of marital happiness, stable employment, and household income above poverty level.

various combinations of marital and employment circumstances of the respondents in our sample. Only 16.2% of the total sample are both married and employed full-time (the first two rows of table 2), and chi-square tests indicate that some types of respondents are less likely than others to have access to the basic elements of this traditional package. For example, while a majority of the white male respondents do not have the total package, they are significantly more likely as a group to be in this category than are their African-American male or female counterparts. Conversely, African-American women are significantly more likely than those composing other race/gender subgroups to have no elements of the package. We also examined the extent to which women in the sample had accessed what might be called the traditional gendered respectability package (namely, the situation in which a woman is married and her husband is employed full-time). This accounted for an additional 11% of the white female respondents but a relatively small percentage of African-American women (5%).

When we start with these basic building blocks of social capital and add consideration of the quality of one's marriage and employment circumstances, the resulting portrait is even more discouraging. Thus we also calculated and include in table 2 the percentage of respondents in the sample who reported an average (mean) or above-average level of marital happiness and a stable job earning wages above the 1995 family of four poverty line (we label this the "high-quality" complete package). Only 8% of the total sample can be characterized as having such a "high-quality" respectability package, and as table 2 indicates, only 3% of the African-American women and no African-American male respondents were so situated at the time of the adult follow-up.

It is, however, also important to note the distribution of desisters within each marital/employment subgroup. Although respondents with the complete or high-quality package constitute relatively small subgroups within this sample, such individuals are in general more likely than others to be classified as desisters (see the figures in parentheses in table 2).<sup>19</sup> In ad-

<sup>19</sup> For this descriptive table, we relied on the three rater judgments to assess the percentage in each category who could be considered desisters. These focused on arrest data first (the lack of recent arrests), but the respondent was not classified as a desister if self-reports indicated more than minor criminal activity in the past year. We achieved a relatively high rate of initial inter-rater reliability (82%), and found that many of the discrepancies in classification were due to one rater's tougher stance toward occasional marijuana use. We relaxed the no-marijuana standard, and where discrepancies remained, we classified the case based on two raters' agreement. These percentage data, like the classification of various hooks for change, were thus derived from a somewhat subjective process and should be interpreted with caution. Nevertheless, we believe that this strategy offers a more accurate picture than that provided by the arrest data alone.

dition, the respondents with no elements of the package are generally most likely to have been classified as persistent in their offending. These distributions can thus be seen as providing support for the basic tenets of Sampson and Laub's theory of informal social control, but they help to clarify the pattern of negative results reported in table 1. (Recall that those analyses focused only on subjective measures of attachment and did not consider the joint effects of a traditional marriage accompanied by a stable job.) As a final step in our analyses of the quantitative data, then, we recalculated the table 1 regressions using access to the traditional respectability package as our measure of adult social bonding.<sup>20</sup> The contrast group consisted of those with either partial or no access. This analysis (see table 3) documents that net of the other variables in the model, access to the complete package was associated with lower self-reported criminal involvement (see table 3). However, we also note that the package variable added only a small increment to the explained variance (1%).<sup>21</sup>

We conclude that the traditional respectability package appears to have had a beneficial effect for a subset of our respondents, but we also observe considerably more variability in adult offending than is accounted for by this marital-employment variable. With these results as a kind of structural backdrop, we now turn to the life history accounts. The narratives reflect the social realities sketched out in table 2 but provide a different window on desistance processes. We wish to emphasize how cognitive shifts and associated agentic moves also add to our understanding of mechanisms associated with life changes, and we theorize that these may be especially important to take into consideration when traditional sources of social capital and social control are in relatively short supply.

#### FINDINGS: QUALITATIVE DATA

The regression procedure, while dedicated to an exploration of variability, is rather limited in its ability to convey the range of adult life circumstances we actually encountered in the process of completing the follow-up. However, even a cursory examination of the shorthand titles assigned by project staff to each narrative account gives a good indication of the range contained within the sample: "two manslaughters," "drink-drift-hit," "drugs, violence, crime," "unhappy, booze, poor," "heroin and prison,"

<sup>20</sup> Due to the small numbers in the various subcategories, for this analysis, we combined the first two groups. That is, the complete package consisted of all of those respondents who were married and employed full-time, or, if female, were married to a husband who was employed full-time.

<sup>21</sup> The logistic regression using recent arrests as the dependent variable produced similar results.

TABLE 3  
ADULT SELF-REPORT OF CRIMINAL INVOLVEMENT REGRESSED ON ADOLESCENT AND  
ADULT VARIABLES

	ADULT CRIMINAL INVOLVEMENT				
	1	2	3	4	5
Sociodemographic variables:					
Age .....	-.04	-.04	-.04	-.04	-.03
Gender (female = 1) .....	-.18**	-.20**	-.18*	-.17*	-.14
Race (African-American = 1) ...	.31***	.29***	.32***	.29***	.42***
Family background:					
Parents' socioeconomic status ...		-.001	.05	.03	.04
Family size .....		.11	.10	.11	.09
Physical abuse .....		.08	.06	.05	.04
Sexual abuse .....		.05	.03	.03	.04
Parental supervision .....		-.02	-.01	-.01	-.01
Attachment to family .....		-.04	-.05	-.04	-.05
Adolescent attitudes and behavior:					
Self-reported delinquency .....			.17*	.15*	.18*
Attachment to school .....			.06	.06	.06
School achievement (grades) .....			-.02	-.01	-.01
Adult social bonds:					
Complete package .....				-.15*	-.10
Gender by race .....					-.11
Gender by complete package .....					.04
Race by complete package .....					-.20
Gender by race by complete package .....					.05
F .....	8.93***	3.61***	3.26***	3.42***	2.91***
R <sup>2</sup> .....	.11	.11	.12	.14	.14

NOTE.—Standardized regression coefficients are presented.  $N = 197$ .

\*  $P \leq .05$ .

\*\*  $P \leq .01$ .

\*\*\*  $P \leq .001$ .

“struggling with alcohol,” “terrible life,” and “prison, killed partner” coexist with respondents labeled “very successful escape,” “optimistic with plans,” “Jesus saves,” and “traditional success.” Many other respondents occupy a middle territory, as suggested by the following titles: “minor trouble,” “just hanging on,” “rulebreaker but stable,” “pretty clean but drugs,” and “shaky future.” Titles that refer to male respondents present a similar picture and (consistent with the regression results) an even higher level of seriousness/chronicity within the persister category: “three time loser-crack,” “prison eighth time,” and “criminal life style” provide a strong contrast to “clean family man,” “financial success,” and “doing well.” Many men also appeared to take up a middle ground, including “pothead,” “job but drugs,” and “successful alcoholic.”

Although our focus here is on this range of variability, the narratives

also reveal central tendencies that constitute an important background to our discussion. In short, an adequate understanding of respondents' change efforts requires at least some orientation to the qualities/characteristics of the lives that must be redirected. Three key elements are (1) the extensive drug involvement of many respondents (a particularly unfortunate feature of the timing of their lives [Elder 1998] includes, for many, exposure to crack cocaine in addition to other drugs), (2) backgrounds that include parental and other family members' criminality and alcohol and drug use, and, undoubtedly related to the above, (3) social milieux characterized by extreme poverty and social marginality.<sup>22</sup> The data described in table 2 are generally indicative of the respondents' lack of access to traditional markers of respectability; however, the following interviewer's description of one respondent's housing circumstances makes more concrete the kinds of contexts within which many of the respondents' change attempts have taken place:

Quite a neighborhood. Right in the heart of the downtown, right in the heart of abandoned buildings. Not a single other building with a doorway on it, or any windows. The homeless shelter and the Catholic Mission on the end of her street, those were the only buildings that seemed to have any, even hope for any residents in them. All of them had smashed windows—no doors.

Her apartment was quite nice, it was very quiet inside, and clean walls. Was pretty much a complete contrast to the neighborhood, which was just deplorable . . . just ah . . . next to unlivable I would say. It seemed alive with criminal activity. I was glad it was [a] morning interview, around ten o'clock.

This respondent had just come out of jail; she was in jail in August. She's, this is the first time in her life where she has been with her children . . . where she's ever had custody of them. Which was . . . pretty amazing. So the respondent is doing well right now. She says she's stayed away from drugs. Just to see the calmness she had in her house and it was just such a contradiction to see this significantly happy family and her caring for her child when the conditions that surround the house were just chaotic and just unimaginable. All the buildings were just destroyed—incredible squalor—and her house wasn't at all like that. There was television and a couch and a chair and stuff and a kitchen table. And it was just quite amazing the contrast there.

We will first examine in some detail the narrative accounts of three women, and then we will focus our attention on the "stories of change" of a larger number of the respondents. Analysis of a complete case or life

<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the unfortunate aggregate picture (i.e., most in the sample are not married, very few have adequate employment, and many persist in their offending) can itself be seen as offering support for Sampson and Laub's basic contentions (see also Giordano, Cernkovich, and Lowery 2001).

history is useful because we can consider how various characteristics combine at the level of the person (an advantage over traditional variable-centered techniques). The complete narrative also has the advantage, relative to standard modeling procedures, of providing a nuanced sense of timing and sequencing across the life course (Morse 1994). In turn, a focus on the sections of the narrative that deal directly with desistance allows us to reach across a larger number of cases, as well as to observe respondents' own use of language as they describe the life changes they have made. We assume an intimate relationship between language and cognition (Mead 1934); thus the ways in which respondents talk about life changes accesses and foregrounds cognitive processes. And, as emphasized above, we wish to highlight the degree to which cognitive and linguistic processes themselves play an important role in behavioral change.<sup>23</sup>

#### Linking Structure and Agency: Three Women

We have chosen cases below that can be conceptualized as representing different positions on a continuum of advantage and disadvantage (i.e., they reflect various levels of access to valued social, cultural, and economic capital). We will use these cases to position structurally the reach and limitations of “a theory of cognitive transformation” and that of a control approach as well. We assert that the role of cognitive transformations will vary (across individuals, across eras, depending on the type of sample) and that mechanisms highlighted in control theory have a similarly contingent quality.

Angie is an atypical respondent in multiple respects. Nevertheless, her

<sup>23</sup> In emphasizing the language and content found within such stories, a word about them as “cultural products” is in order. We assumed that these respondents' narrations necessarily draw on the type of material that is structurally and culturally available. In addition, while it is conventional to argue that the open-ended format allows respondents to “tell their own stories,” we recognize that the mode of discourse they do adapt reflects prior participation in a specific set of institutional and informal experiences (Davies 1991). Thus when a respondent tells the interviewer that she is “a thousand percent happier because of Jesus . . . it's just like a day at a time with Him,” she has drawn on her involvement within religious and treatment settings. This is consistent with Bakhtin's notion that language has creative and dynamic properties, but also engages meanings created prior to a particular local use: “Words have the ‘taste’ of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour” (Bakhtin 1981, p. 293). Even where the referent is the less formal world of intimate social networks, then, a respondent's descriptions of effects and influences (e.g., conceptions of motherhood or romantic relationships) will necessarily draw from a delimited perceptual world that connects to her social locations (Bourdieu 1977).

outlier status is useful as an ideal type or anchor for the advantaged end of the continuum.

*Angie: "Great Success"*

The interviewer described this 31-year-old white female as having a great personality and social skills and also noted that she is "very, very beautiful" and "very intelligent and personable." Comparing her life to that of the friends she listed during the 1982 interview, Angie sees herself as doing much better "because I'm more settled down I always knew where I wanted to be and I'm basically there."

Angie initially got into trouble in high school for fighting and, later, for selling drugs (this included a lucrative business selling LSD). "My mom, she like drank and smoked dope and she had no idea that I was selling drugs. My teachers and everybody liked me in school. I was well liked, well mannered, I didn't cause trouble in school . . . and they knew I could make good grades . . . and they were just trying to help me." She described herself as very popular, and a leader, in prison: "All the girls really looked up to me. I helped them out a lot. . . . I was made president of the cottage . . . the superintendent of the place had tears in his eyes when I left." However, she also indicated that "going there [to prison] is not what changed my attitude. Mostly my family did, and I decided that that wasn't the road I wanted to go down." After her incarceration, Angie returned to high school where she got straight As and eventually graduated.

Angie is currently employed as an office manager earning \$35,000 a year. She has been married twice (she describes her first husband as "a selfish man . . . he would steal the grocery money out of my purse and run out and buy parts for his motorcycle"). Her current husband, a former police officer, is president of his own contracting company (inherited from his mother) and makes \$96,000 per year. She reports that her husband "has a big influence on me, cause I'd hate to get into any trouble, and you know he's a very straight and narrow type guy." Angie states that she is happy now, "because I know where I'm going, I know what I'm doing. I'm raising my kids [her own two; she also has stepchildren] . . . hell one of them might be the next United States president."

This narrative includes evidence of parental deviance (a clear risk factor—a deficit). Both the interviewer's description and Angie's own comments, however, also detail an array of personal and social resources that likely facilitated her eventual reform. She was intelligent, attractive, and possessed the type of social skills that pleased institutional gatekeepers (the superintendent of the juvenile institution, her teachers) and contem-



poraries alike (“all the girls looked up to me”).<sup>24</sup> In addition, while Angie’s family circumstances may have initially contributed to her delinquency involvement, her parents were nevertheless able to step in and provide a high level of social support during and after her institutionalization (as she put it, “they threw all their weight behind me”).

This case reveals subtle selection processes that are not evident from the results shown in table 1 (where, aside from level of adolescent delinquency, time 1 predictor variables were not significantly related to level of reported adult criminality). However, when we are able to view these variables as a *cluster* of personal and social resources, it is easier to discern Angie’s clear advantages. Individuals with such resources should be less likely than others to veer off the traditional path of conformity to begin with, but if they do, it should also be much easier for them, compared to their less-advantaged counterparts, to make a course correction (Hagan 1991).

While the case does offer support for selection effects, it illustrates nonetheless that adult life course events are also very important. This respondent describes her marriage and its impact (“I’d hate to get into any trouble”) in a way that is entirely consistent with basic tenets of Sampson and Laub’s (1993) theory of informal social control. A good marriage, good jobs (her own, and that of her husband), and children have undoubtedly added considerably to Angie’s investment portfolio. In this case, then, we would assign only a small part—a supporting role—for cognitive transformations and accompanying agentic moves, mechanisms which are, however, in evidence. Angie indicates that such a cognitive transformation occurred (“I decided that that wasn’t the road I wanted to go down”), and her subsequent successful return to school can be considered an agentic move that connects directly to that decision-making process. Further, while Angie is included in table 3 as one who is married with a full-time job, these events cannot be considered pivotal (a turning point), because she had made significant improvements to her life well

<sup>24</sup> We assessed the influence of attractiveness across the sample as a whole, by including interviewer ratings of attractiveness (available at both time 1 and time 2 interviews) in the regression analyses described above. The attractiveness variable was not significant, and interactions with gender were also not significant. While attractiveness can be considered a gendered form of social capital, there appeared to be many countervailing influences within the data. For example, the following excerpt from another respondent’s life story: “they just like picking fights, if you look better than them or whatever, which I mean, I ain’t got the prettiest face in the world but I have a nice ass body okay?” [Interviewer comments, “You have a nice face too but go ahead.”] “If I put on something and they don’t like it you know, God! All hell breaks loose” (i.e., fights are likely to ensue). The attractiveness variable in Angie’s case was thus likely important as it combined with other valuable resources such as education, social skills, and the like.

before accessing these elements of the traditional respectability package. Nevertheless, considered within the context of her array of initial advantages, and their connection to key adult transition markers, our knowledge of her cognitive transformation, while enlightening, remains, on balance, of modest importance.

Now let us turn to a case that can be seen as occupying a middle zone, conceptually, on this hypothetical structural advantage-disadvantage continuum. Stacy, a 31-year-old white female, was initially contacted while in prison. She refused to be interviewed there, however, fearing that the interview would somehow jeopardize her upcoming release. Subsequently, she developed a correspondence with the first author and eventually consented to be interviewed after being granted parole. The author interviewed Stacy at her mother's home in the southern part of the state, where she was living with her six-year-old son.

*Stacy: "Lots of Prison"*

This respondent had accumulated an extensive arrest history, for offenses ranging from burglary and theft to assault and drug use charges, and had served three separate terms in the state's adult prison for women (eight years, which at that point constituted the bulk of Stacy's adult life).

Stacy's mother's home, while located in a somewhat marginal neighborhood (e.g., factory across the street), was a sturdy and immaculate two-story. Stacy had recently constructed an elaborate Halloween tableau all across the front porch of the house and appeared extremely pleased to be reunited with her son. This respondent was likeable and had a good sense of humor. She had not, however, accumulated either of the elements of the traditional respectability package. As a self-identified lesbian, Stacy appeared unlikely to benefit from a traditional good marriage effect. Aside from a general societal tendency to marginalize nontraditional family arrangements, Stacy's mother's disapproval may further inhibit the development of a stable intimate relationship. "I'll probably always live with my mom; we're just close. My mother's a Christian now, so like, if I was to become involved [romantically] I'll take it outside of here [her mother's home]." In addition, while Stacy expressed pride about her expertise and experience as a plumber, virtually all of this experience had been accumulated in prison. In spite of several attempts, she had been unable to make any inroads into the plumber's union in her area. Nevertheless, Stacy remained optimistic, indicating that other skills (roofing, home remodeling) should enable her to land a job in the near future.

Stacy's family background (both nuclear and extended) was characterized by extensive drug use and criminality: "There was always drug abuse in my family. My father was a junkie. . . . He had been to a prison

several times.” Stacy’s mother was also well known to the local police (most of her arrests were alcohol related; however, during the adolescent interview, Stacy insisted on listing her mother’s occupation as “professional shoplifter”). “I’ve always been raised by my grandmother, and my mother and my aunt, we all lived together. And, when I was 13 my grandmother had a stroke. And that’s where I started going bad . . . my grandma was everything and she was a good Christian woman and when she took sick, I didn’t know how to deal—I couldn’t cope.” Stacy started smoking pot at about age 10 or 11. In addition, she began to develop a reputation as “tough” and a fighter: “I had the reputation that I was real mean in school, where, the white people had to really be tough.” Stacy eventually was sent to an alternative school “where the bad kids went, nothing but a dope—all the bad kids—dopefest . . . from all over the city. But at lunch time there was an abandoned house . . . so we all would run in there and get high. And I would stay so blitzed out in the school I would just lay with my head on the desk.”

Many of Stacy’s problems with the legal system revolved around drugs and alcohol and assaultive behaviors: “I come out of the bar and they’d [police] be like ‘hey Stacy how’s it going’ I’d just be, ‘ah shut up and kiss my ass,’ and pretty soon I’d go to jail every time. I’d be just so zonked out I wouldn’t even remember until I woke up.” Even in prison, she continued to evoke this tough persona: “I was always taught, just take the biggest one [inmate] out and the rest of them will leave you alone.”

Although she had thus accumulated an extensive criminal and incarceration history, was unemployed, and had no spouse or other stable intimate partner, during the interview Stacy articulated a detailed account of changes in her life that can only be described as cognitive in nature:

I’m through. You know. I’m really, really, really tired of that life. I don’t want it no more man. I laid it down. You know. I had to go to a group Thursday night. My parole officer—its a parole education group—and when I walked in, it’s an old ex-cop that runs it, and he’s telling the guy that’s facilitatin’ this new group I’m in, he’s telling him, he’s introducing me, and he leans over and whispers to him, he said “tell you one thing. Don’t ever try to fight her cause she’ll whip your ass.” You know and I said “man I said I outlived that life.” I said “I’m through with it” and we talked for a minute, and he’s like “Stacy you’ve really grown up you know.” Just things are different. You know the last time I was on parole I worked two jobs, and I was doing really good but I would go to bars, right. I hadn’t fully gave up the ghost. I was still trying to live both worlds. I told my mom the other day I said all my life I’ve had this reputation but [now] I’m gonna use it to my advantage you know. Because like people that come around, like I was telling you the one girl in my family that’s still actively using [drugs], I was able to use it [leans in a mock menacing manner toward

the author and yells] "GET OUT!!!" Before I was trying to do all the right things and my actions were doing good things but I still tried to live both worlds. I mean this last time I went back [to prison] you don't know what an awakening that was, because nothing happened [she felt that her parole violation was trivial] and I spent three years of my life, day for day and three years.

Stacy contrasted this last prison experience with the previous two periods of incarceration: "I mean everything's different when you got a kid involved."

The disadvantages here are considerable, including those that were inherited (parental drug and alcohol abuse/criminality, father absence due to incarceration) and that accumulated within Stacy's own life (high school dropout, reputation as a troublemaker, drug involvement, and many years of institutionalization). In addition, her nontraditional sexual orientation will affect her entry into marriage and may negatively influence employment opportunities as well. Nevertheless, Stacy has some job skills and experience (e.g., roofing) and has been able to find work in the past. In addition, she has the stability her mother's residence provides ("she pays the bills") and can benefit from her mother's apparent reform ("she's a Christian now"). Thus, access to some rules and resources (Giddens 1984) positions Stacy to benefit from the cognitive transformation she describes in considerable detail.<sup>25</sup>

In contrast, Nicole, our third case, appears to be almost fully encapsulated in a deviant world, and thus she anchors the highly disadvantaged end of the continuum.

*Nicole: "Rock Bottom Homeless"*

We located Nicole, a 29-year-old African-American female, living in a shelter for battered women in Akron, Ohio, after a search of approximately nine months. This respondent was particularly difficult to find because there were open warrants out for her arrest, she was using a variety of aliases ["I'm always somebody else. I'm never me."], and she did not have a permanent address. Nicole has been arrested seven times as an adult and served two sentences at the state prison for women (primarily arrested for soliciting, but also drug trafficking and petty theft). She told the interviewer that she was not currently in an abusive relationship, but that

<sup>25</sup> We assume, with others who have focused scholarly attention on the narrative, that the act of story telling/narration itself is consequential. Thus, we note that Stacy has not only told the story for the enlightenment of the interviewer, but also references other "tellings" ("I told my mom the other day, I said"; "It's like I told my parole officer"). A key premise, then, is that the story as crafted, continually revised, and told to others has clarifying and motivational significance.

she and her three children, ages 11, 5, and 4, had no place to live: “I been tryin’ for three months to get in the regular homeless shelters.” Nicole did not tell the shelter staff about her drug problem, because, she reported, they would tell her “‘We can’t help you here, you gotta go somewhere else.’ And I can’t take that chance to get put out on the street. I had to lie.”

Nicole’s early family history included severe physical and sexual abuse. In addition, both parents were addicts. “I ran the streets by myself. I was raised up under people, different people’s care. I got stuff by talkin’ to people and askin’ for stuff. Food, money, I didn’t have clothes. When I get money I go eat. When I was a kid, my mother wasn’t nothin’ but a child. My mother’s mother wasn’t around her, she didn’t have a mother . . . I was raped by just about every man my mother ever had.” Asked why she kept running away, Nicole replied, “I told the judge, ‘Well, hell, if I gotta stay home and get fucked by all her men, I might as well be out on the street and get fucked and get paid for it.’ My dad shot up drugs. He sexually molested me as a child . . . eight years old [long story of abuse] . . . and he did it again when I was 13.” She told her mom the first time, and “she said I was lying and whooped me. My dad tied my hands to the table and beat the hell out of me—a belt—he beat me all the time . . . [shows interviewer a forehead scar] I got a whoopin’ when I was a kid for not fightin’. I got beat up and every time I ran home my mama beat my ass for not fightin’, so I learned how to fight and I start beatin’ everybody’s ass.”

At the time of the adult follow-up, both Nicole and her mother were addicted to crack cocaine: “that’s how we started becoming friends [around 1988].” Her mother “had a lot of friends that also came over and they had lots and lots of dope and we would sit up with them for days and days and days and smoke.” But her mother sometimes wants to take her money and her drugs “and it don’t work that way, not in the getting high game. ‘I’m sorry, mama, no mama, I got a habit just like you do and I’m tryin’ to support mine—it’s my shit.’ This is where our conflicts came from.” She described many housing problems: “My sister’s house had burnt down so I didn’t have any clothes or any pictures or anything left in my life but my kids, and [then, where she was staying] the roof fell in, ‘cause it had rained so hard that year, and the ceiling fell in on me. We ended up going to the hotels [Red Cross paid] for a few days until the money ran out. After that I stayed with my mom in her car. Me and my mom stayed in her car.”

Nicole has never been married, but has cohabited with two partners. The longer-term relationship of the two is a highly conflictual one: “He beat me while I was pregnant. Choked me so bad one time that I could not breathe. Told me that it wasn’t his . . . the milkman’s baby, the

mailman's baby until it came out and looked just like his ass and then he signed the birth certificate. I'm still in love. Yeah, I'm always gonna love him."

"My kids know [about her addiction and other problems]. All my kids do all day long is hug and kiss me and tell me how much they love me. Just the other month, Tommy didn't have no shoes . . . slit all the way across the bottom." He received some money for new shoes, and Nicole told the interviewer she used the money to buy drugs. "He told me that no matter how wrong I do, Tommy loves me for me. He gives me all the strength in the world, and he still right there. Right there rooting for Mommy." Interviews generally ended with respondents hopes for the future:

Yeah, it's shapin' up [starts crying] . . . because of them [her children] I gotta get my shit together 'cause they deserve more than this. Those tears is for the strength my son has given me basically and the things I know that he has done without just so I could smoke some crack. . . . I'm tired of being tired. I'm tired of being homeless. I'm tired of kids not having what they deserve. . . . I, I see me gettin' a house and a job, by the time this year is out I've set goals to have a job and be off of welfare. My plan is to get into a house when school starts in September to start going to school to be a nurses' assistant.

The interviewer's own blunt assessment is not as hopeful: "Nicole is very unlikely to get a real job because she has no child care, no skills, no social skills, no permanent address, no phone to even get notified of a job, weighs over 300 pounds and could not pass a normal employer screening which most jobs have in the form of a police check, because she is wanted. Her kids are very lovable."

Nicole expresses a general readiness to change ("I'm tired of being homeless. . . . I've set goals to have a job") and clearly loves her children (later in the interview she declares, "If I have any breath in my body, my kids will not be separated and dispersed"). But she has almost no individual, family, social, or institutional resources to draw on as she envisions a different way of life. Not only are traditional arrangements like marriage or employment a remote possibility, but there appear to be no hooks for change anywhere in sight.

Our review of these three cases suggests the following general proposition: *on a continuum of advantage and disadvantage, the real play of agency is in the middle*. Given a relatively "advantaged" set of circumstances, the cognitive transformations and agentic moves we describe are hardly necessary; under conditions of sufficiently extreme disadvantage, they are unlikely to be nearly enough. Emphases within control theory are similarly tethered to structure, arguably to the "relatively advantaged"

end of our continuum. In short, a reasonable distribution in terms of access to traditional forms of social capital/control is required for variables like marriage or employment to emerge as key predictors.

Our sample of serious contemporary offenders is, by its nature, skewed toward the disadvantaged end of the continuum. Nevertheless, the life stories most often reveal at least some evidence of a mix (i.e., the respondents have some resources, and the environment contains some pro-social elements), and it is around this mix that change efforts are necessarily constructed. While Davies (1991) emphasized the constraints that attend to being “constituted through the discourses of a number of collectives” (1991, p. 43), that there are indeed *multiple* discourses from which to draw itself opens up possibilities for change and the potential for efficacious individual action. As we emphasized at the outset, even a disadvantaged adult life course will be characterized by increased exposure to a wider array of experiences, others, and contexts. Thus, the individual has an important role in selecting from that which is available within the environment, drawing closer to a given stimulus, engaging in self-reflection, and making adjustments—both to the self and to the environment.

We find support for this idea when we consider the range of variability evident across the full set of narrative accounts. Although the majority of respondents would by any definition be considered disadvantaged, they do not go on to tell the identical story. There is substantial variation in how fully respondents have embraced the reform project, in the types of hooks for change they draw on, the uses they make of them, and in the timing of effects (i.e., a catalyst for change that has no effect at time X suddenly “kicks in” at time Y). Our objective in concentrating more closely on sections of the narrative dealing with respondents’ desistance efforts is to illustrate more concretely our central notion that cognitive transformations are an important component of significant and sustained behavioral change.

We first describe differences in actors’ overall readiness, or *openness to change*. Then we turn our attention to four specific *hooks* that feature heavily in the respondents’ desistance stories. We emphasize individual variation in receptivity to particular hooks, as well as variations in the transformative potential of the hooks themselves. Thus, as we discuss each catalyst or hook for change, an important consideration is the degree to which such a hook enables the actor to craft a satisfying *replacement self* and one that is seen as incompatible with continued criminal behavior. These identities and the new environment and social networks that connect to them will ideally work in concert to foster a gradual *redefinition of deviance* as no longer a meaningful, viable component of the actor’s behavioral repertoire. These basic concepts and an ideal typical sequence

in which changes may occur are sketched out in figure 1. This figure also outlines areas of overlap with control theory and suggests the distinctive conceptual territory occupied by each perspective on the desistance process.

#### Openness to Change

All the women and men in our study experienced a highly problematic adolescence, and respondents' later lives are often characterized by an array of legal and other problems as they have matured into adulthood. Without question, therefore, these offenders have received many messages from formal and informal sources about the need to settle down and become responsible citizens. In view of this, it is not surprising that so many of the life histories include references to change. Gergen and Gergen (1986) note that there are only three types of stories available within the genre of the personal narrative, that is, those encompassing progressive, regressive, or stability themes. Given the intensity of their earlier problem backgrounds, one might expect that these respondents would view a stability or regressive theme as undesirable. However, it is important to point out that the progressive narrative is far from universally embraced. Indeed, stories told by some of the more recalcitrant individuals provide an essential contrast to those we will later emphasize (those produced by clear desisters or others who are making substantial headway).

The respondent quoted below, for example, is distinguished by her complete inability to perceive an "opening" that would allow her to shift direction.

*Respondent 2.*—"I do that [prostitution], you know. I mean, once you do it, it's just so easy. It's all I know . . . and to really change I would have to change my whole lifestyle, my friends, everything I know" (31-year-old white female, never married, unemployed, receives social security disability due to heart problems).

As we indicated in the previous examination of the lives of three specific women, the ways in which the respondents are positioned structurally varies and is a foundation upon which any change efforts will be constructed. However, the respondent's comments above make clear that this involves perceptual as well as objective elements (Bourdieu 1977). The respondent we quote below provides a particularly good illustration of the idea of an initial cognitive "openness" as an important precursor of significant behavior change. Interviewed in one of the state prisons, Tony simply cannot imagine (as the interviewer put it) "doing the straight life thing." In this case, Tony remains closed to the idea of changing, even though he had been married to a woman who was herself making strongly prosocial moves ("She was like move with me, move on with me, grow



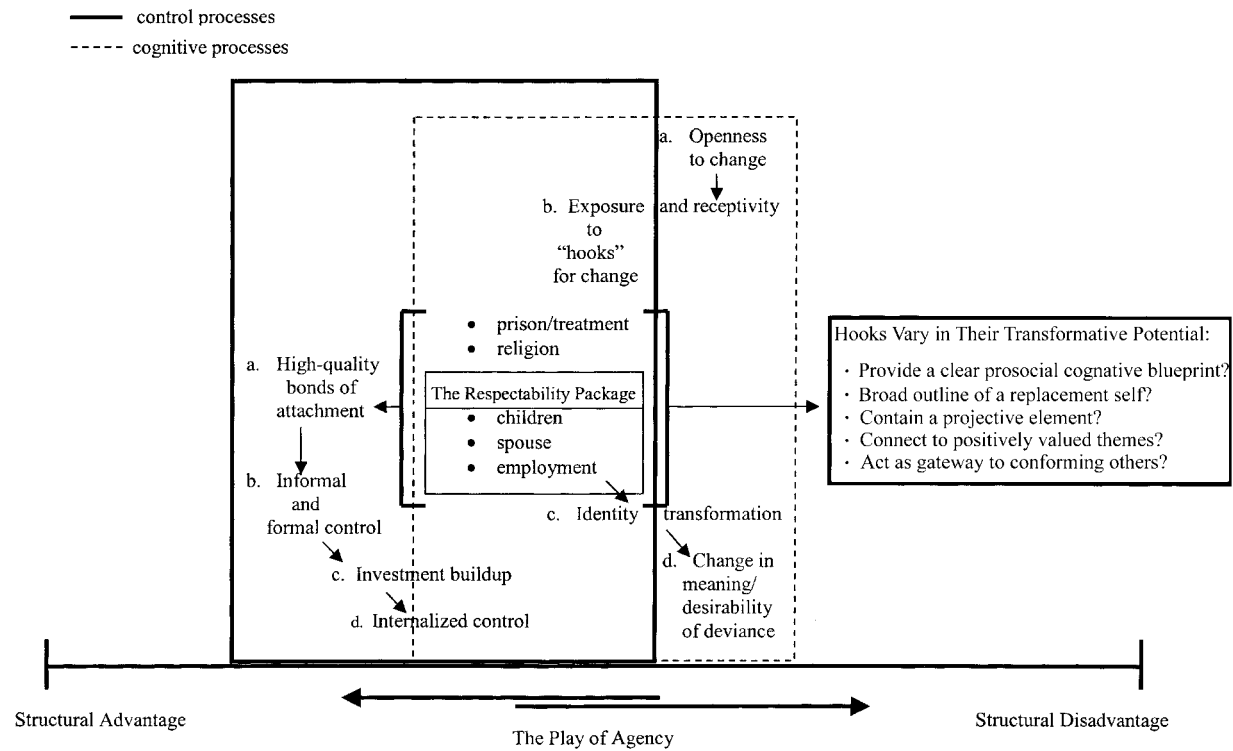


FIG. 1.—Mechanisms associated with desistance

with me. Or we're gonna have to be apart"). This suggests that the actor's cognitive orientation is connected to but conceptually distinct not only from structural position but also from adult opportunities presented by the environment.

*Respondent 3.*—"I know that once I get out there that I probably most likely will be doing the same thing, you know. I got the same guys coming to pick me up from prison as I did the last three times. I mean what I'd rather do is, is just stay out there. Them's my people. It ain't like I wouldn't want to be them. I just like to not get caught [laughs]. I like the lifestyle, but I just, I just don't like this part of it. A lot of people can't admit it to theirself, but yeah I know I'll never change. I'll be back I know. I don't have no skills or nothing. I'm gonna go back out there and sell dope again."

When asked, "Do you have goals . . . about learning a trade and doing the straight life thing?" the respondent replied "I don't have no interest in it. I can't communi . . . I have a hard time, it's it's a hard ability to even to to communicate with people that, that, that ain't never been locked up, or ain't never, you know experienced or been through the same things that you been through. It's really hard. All my juvenile life and all my young adult life I've been locked up. And then the times I wasn't locked up, I was running with criminals. So it's hard you know, you just feel out of place and weird. You feel like a [deleted] at a Klan meeting. You feel out of place. You just don't feel right" (31-year-old white male, married but separated, currently in prison, employed full-time as boxing trainer in prison earning \$910 annually).

Other respondents adapt the basic outline of a change theme, but their stories lack depth and definition. For example, the respondent below expresses a general desire to live a different kind of life, but the behavioral changes that need to accompany this increased awareness are projected onto an unspecified future time.

*Respondent 4.*—"I got to start being responsible for myself, because I want to, and I know this is the right way. This is the way I want to be. You don't want to shoot dope no more . . . you don't want someone to touch you just so you can make money. You don't want to go through life like this, you don't want your kids to be brought up in, being exposed to the stuff that you didn't like" (29-year-old black female, married, part-time direct care worker for the mentally handicapped, earns \$5.00 per hour).

Other respondents move more enthusiastically into a change story, but their use of the present tense suggests that the journey is very much in process or incomplete (e.g., "I've got a little wildness in me yet, but hopefully its about gone" or "When I'm straight my kids are not afraid to speak to me, not as afraid to bring their friends around"). Yet another

set of respondents develop a more convincing and detailed story but then are subsequently unable to sustain the progressive narrative even for the time encompassed by the interview itself. This is of particular interest because as Linde (1993) notes, as stories unfold, both narrators and listeners share a desire for consistency and coherence. We refer to these narratives as containing a hedge or break in the story line. Carla, interviewed in the state prison for women, starts off with a typical change theme.

*Respondent 5.*—“I know the consequences more . . . I want to change. I don’t want to go back to [hometown]. I’m going to try something different.” But later she capitulates: “Most of us come back here. I think that I’ll run into some more problems, because as far as my survival instinct, that has really got me through some things. I don’t want to let that go because it’s been good to me. And until I let that go I’m not going to change totally” (31-year-old black female, never married, incarcerated, employed as head cook making \$300 annually).

Another male respondent interviewed in prison contrasted his own orientation with that of many of the younger inmates. He expressed dismay that so many young men were willing to leave prison and risk rearrest for something rather trivial. Eventually, he noted that “it would have to be really big” (a large amount of money) for him to become involved in illegal ventures in the future. This is obviously not a complete cognitive transformation because he has not yet closed off the possibility of future deviation (i.e., he has left a cognitive “opening” in the other direction). The narratives of still other respondents are more internally consistent and develop airtight stories of change. But while an airtight story is an accomplishment, the bottom line is a change in behavior. Thus, we focus particular attention on those airtight stories that were fully corroborated by low self-reported deviance and the absence of recent arrests.

A simple feature that distinguishes the talk of incomplete and complete desisters is the generally flawless use of the past tense in stories produced by the latter. For example, respondents will refer to their deviant behavior as a past (e.g., “He don’t trust me because of my past” or “She is constantly throwing the past up in my face”). Consistent with our emphasis on identity shifts, respondents who had desisted also frequently put a great deal of distance between their old, discarded selves and those they currently claim.

*Respondent 6.*—“I was a wild child” (31-year-old black female, never married, unemployed).

*Respondent 7.*—“I was on a tear” (28-year-old white female, married twice, now divorced and cohabiting, working part-time “under the table” with her male partner as a roofer).

*Respondent 8.*—“When I was a kid I was a nut. Can’t you tell by the

answers [to the structured interview]—crazy—I can't believe I used to do that and lived through it" (30-year-old black female, never married, now receiving government assistance).

*Respondent 9.*—"I was fast. HOT" (29-year-old black female, currently married, employed full-time as machine operator earning \$13,500).

*Respondent 10.*—"I thought I was a little bad ass" (30-year-old male, married, currently employed part-time as a house cleaner earning \$9,600 annually).

*Respondent 11.*—"I couldn't wait to get this baby out of my stomach so I could run the streets" (31-year-old biracial [black/white] female, married, unemployed, receiving government assistance).

These narratives encompass the full range, including respondents who have no intention of desisting, others who have opened up to the idea, and still others whose behaviors appear to be in good alignment with their stated intentions to desist. We posited that an initial openness to change appeared to be a minimal starting point in the move toward a more conforming way of life. It is quite possible that this type of up-front cognitive shift (an increased readiness to change) is more important to consider than it may have been in earlier eras because the respondents we studied are both (a) more fully enmeshed in deviant lifestyles (i.e., the drug culture) and (b) further removed from social arenas that constitute a respectable alternative. In addition, society has provided them with less in the way of a template for change either by virtue of tradition (e.g., the shotgun wedding) or opportunity (availability of good jobs with benefits). Thus, the individuals who compose our sample have more to overcome even as they have been provided with less societal direction about how to do so. Given these realities, it seems unlikely that many respondents will begin the desistance process without a heightened awareness of what it is that they are undertaking and absent a strong desire to begin such a conversion effort (see Laub and Sampson [2001] for an alternative view).

However, our examination of the range of desistance stories also leads us to conclude that lasting changes will frequently need to be built upon processes that are ultimately more tangible than desire and good intentions. Thus, a sociological theory of desistance will necessarily include attention to environmental influences (our notion of hooks for change). Technically, giving up crime need not involve acquiring any new attitudes or behaviors. Unlike a change in careers, for example, desistance is achieved when one simply stops engaging in the criminal behaviors in question. Practically, however, chances for successful change will be greatly enhanced when the individual also engages with other experiences that have good conventionalizing potential. A theory of informal control also focuses on such catalysts, but here we wish to showcase how cognitive shifts are important precursors, concomitants, and consequences of these

new life course experiences. As we focus on the actor's own cognitions and associated agentic moves, we seek to tilt the balance slightly away from the catalyst and toward the individual—in what is ideally conceptualized as a fully reciprocal relationship.

#### Hooks for Change

Consistent with the quantitative findings and our discussion to this point, respondents in this sample, whether male or female, were very unlikely to build a story of change around the development of a rewarding career, and only a few focus heavily on stable employment. Two hooks that were more prominent link to experiences with formal organizational settings (prison or treatment and religion), and two relate to intimate networks (children and marital/romantic partner). Obviously, we included attention to the family in our quantitative analyses, where we determined that levels of attachment (to children and partner) were not strongly related to desistance. Thus the narratives are useful, not only because they reveal different hooks for change such as religion, but because they allow us to examine familiar variables like children and marriage using a different theoretical lens. This adds to our understanding of mechanisms of change, helps to explain some of control theory's negative cases (e.g., individuals with high attachment to a spouse who nevertheless persist in offending), and brings to light gender differences that were not apparent in our analysis of the quantitative data.

#### *Prison/Treatment*

In the aggregate, prison and even most treatment strategies do not fare well as catalysts for lasting change. Nevertheless, a subset of the respondents (about 13% of the women and 27% of the men) did focus heavily on the effect of either prison or a treatment setting. The story we quote below describes a rather dramatic cognitive transformation linked to a prison experience.

*Respondent 12.*—“Um hm . . . I can remember in particular being in my room one night [in the juvenile institution] and um, looking out. There were people coming from the public to see a play that they were having at the theater, and ah and there were some young children and they looked up in the window and they said ah, ‘Are there really criminals in there?’ And it just, it just kind of hit me. That’s what I needed to hear. I wasn’t, I wasn’t a criminal. I was making myself look bad by doing all of these things because I couldn’t control what was going on in my life. And I realized that I had to take that control. I had to do it” (30-year-old biracial

[Hispanic/white] female, married, freelances as occupational therapist earning \$45.00 per hour).

This statement nicely summarizes the basic concept of a cognitive transformation. In this case, the respondent ties her change in direction to the prison experience, but she has focused heavily on her own shift in attitude, rather than actions of prison staff or a particular type of treatment program. In addition, she emphasized her own actions or agentic moves ("I had to take that control"), as providing a way out of her problem circumstances. More commonly, stories that feature jail or prison depict a kind of wearing down process or battle fatigue associated with the accumulation of such experiences (see also Baskin and Sommers 1998; Shover 1996). While less dramatic, these stories also document a cognitive shift.

*Respondent 13.*—"I got tired of being in, sitting around a whole bunch of mother fuckas hollarin' about they problems. I had my own and I wasn't sitting hollerin' about mine. I did it and may as well go on and take the consequences and not holler about it and go on and I just said this is enough. I'm tired. I'm tired. I just want a peaceful life" (32-year-old black female, single, never married, unemployed, public assistance).

*Respondent 14.*—"I am getting old for all that penitentiary and jail stuff. I leave that for the young folks. I am getting too old for that. My body can't handle it . . . I feel like a 50-year-old" (31-year-old biracial [black/white] female, married, unemployed, government assistance).

Unfortunately, such shifts are inherently somewhat limited in their transformative potential. While we have emphasized the actor's role in selecting, moving toward, or at least resonating with the hook for change, in regard to prison, it is the criminal justice system that does all of the selecting. In addition, such cognitions are eventually grounded in the past (memories of previous jail time) and do little to direct or sustain any kind of forward motion. Thus, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) recently emphasized the degree to which human agency necessarily encompasses a "projective" component. In contrast, a variety of treatment strategies (e.g., self-help groups) fare better in these respects. Note the very active role this respondent describes in relation to the treatment she "received."

*Respondent 15.*—"I prayed. I went to church. I went to a drug treatment program. I went into detox. I got a social worker. I got a counselor, and I ran and got me some help. I ran and asked people to help me cause I wanted my life together. I am proud of myself and I have to pray and work on this every day of my life. Being clean is a job you have to work on everyday, because I wanted to get my life together. I wanted to be well. I didn't want to be sick from drugs. I wanted something out of life. I got tired of being down . . . it could have been the loss of my kids too. But most of all it was me. I wanted to get myself together. Whatever help

I need, I have. I gets help for it now. I have a lot of people in my lives that help me. I continue to get help everyday to keep me and my children together and to keep me on the right feet” (32-year-old black female, never married, unemployed).

In addition, treatment programs provide the actor with a well-developed linguistic and cognitive guide to the change process. That is, they offer the actor a great deal of specific detail about how one is to proceed as a changed individual. We refer to this as a kind of cognitive *blueprint*.

*Respondent 16.*—“Narcotics Anonymous has taught me if I want to not use drugs, then I have to change my behavior. I have a lot of time to think my decisions on life out . . . find out what I like and what I don’t like. I have a counselor I talk to if I need to talk to anybody. I’m closer to my family and friends now than ever, and I do nothing spontaneous. I think about everything that I do. I’m really happy with the decisions I make today. That’s because I made some bad ones and I’m learning from them. I’m never ashamed of anything I’ve done in the past because without those things I wouldn’t be me” (30-year-old black female, married, now employed full-time as a nurse’s aide making \$11,700 a year).

The tone and content of this contemplative answer contrasts sharply with the descriptions of prior, discarded selves (“wild, fast, hot”) quoted earlier. Indeed, the interviewer notes include the observation that this respondent seemed almost “programmed” in her responses. This programming includes specific details about how to think (e.g., “I do nothing spontaneous”), and what to think as well (e.g., learn from the past and move on).

Treatment also provides for more in the way of a *replacement self* that may be seen as superior to, or at least more socially acceptable than, the identities previously held (e.g., recovering addict vs. “crack whore” or “ex-con” [Sterk 1999]). Often, *access to new peer associations* is an integral part of the identity transformation process.

*Respondent 17.*—“Way I was goin’, I was just goin’ down hill real fast. Rehab, that was the best thing that happened to me. Because I got off drugs and started meetin’ people that didn’t use drugs. See where I come from, and the community we stayed in, I didn’t know people stopped, just stopped usin’ drugs and alcohol. I didn’t know that. I thought they either bad or went to jail. And uh, I met a whole new different set of friends, you know. Different people from different backgrounds, different culture and really let me know that it wasn’t just a addiction that affected black people, you know. It didn’t matter what color you were, what was your career background, your home status didn’t matter, didn’t discriminate” (31-year-old black female, never married, full-time employment as a nursing assistant earning \$20,800 a year). The interview continued:

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*Interviewer:* Like what kind of things do they like and what do they like to do?

*Respondent:* They like to go out of town, shoppin'. They like to go, my one friend she like to go skiin'. And I ain't ever been. I was kinda scared, you know cause skiin' is going down hill in all that snow, but she said, said it's fun. So I might try it.

Many of the more successful respondents could be described as "going off the deep end" or at least as throwing themselves wholeheartedly into a new direction. The narratives are especially useful in that they help to convey differences in the depth or centrality of this new commitment (Stryker 1980). Of course, control theory emphasizes the importance of commitment, along with investment, as an important dimension of the change process; however, these forms of capital are generally associated with a gradual build up over time (e.g., with more years of marriage, more time on the job [Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998]). We agree completely with this conception but also find it useful to consider the early cognitive changes (up-front work) that may help to initiate such long-term processes. Due to their extremely marginal positions at the outset, such respondents may not believe (perhaps correctly) that a half-hearted approach to X or Y will be sufficient as a bridge to lasting change. This notion of a whole-hearted and up-front commitment is especially apparent when we consider religion as a hook for change.

*Religion*

A large number of respondents within the sample make at least some reference to God, and women were somewhat more likely to consider religious experiences important catalysts for changes they have made (13% of the women as contrasted with 7% of the men). However, some narratives were almost completely dominated by such references. Consistent with our perspective, these experiences linked to cognitive as well as associated behavioral changes.

*Respondent 18.*—"Ah the Lord. I love the Lord and I want to do what is right in His sight. I realized that God loved me, not the world. I felt like the world, people in the law and stuff, tried to throw me away, in jail . . . didn't want to try and see what the problem is, and try to see how to meet those needs. I knew the Lord loved me so I finally turned my heart back to the Lord. And He changed my heart and my life. My whole sense of direction was changed from self-centered, to looking to the Lord and trusting the Lord. I don't go to the bars or anything like that. I look at people differently. I look at the poor a lot more, you know. He's teaching me to be more like Him. That's it.

"I'm a thousand percent happier because of Jesus." Regarding her fu-



ture: “I see it just fine. I mean, it’s just like day at a time with Him, you know. I see my future very bright. That’s how I see it. Wherever He takes me, that’s where I’ll go” (31-year-old white female, never married, currently unemployed).

The following interviewer notes regarding respondent 19 (discussed below) illustrate the dominating quality of some of the lifestyles that become oriented around religious faith. In these cases, religion provides the all-encompassing blueprint for behavior and a highly prosocial replacement self:

This respondent is extremely, extremely religious. Religion is the only thing on her mind. All her friends are from church. All she talked about is Jesus. Felt guilty playing a board game because felt she should be talking to Jesus. Not concerned with material goods or career. Says her daughter has seen the Virgin Mary. She doesn’t miss anything she used to do. Nothing boring about religion, she says. She feels guilty if she’s doing anything besides talking to Jesus and Mary. Thinks the rapture will come in six years.

The religious conversion also frequently opens up a new arena for building alternative interpersonal ties (“All her friends are from church”), and these individuals can provide concrete advice and reinforcement for sustaining the new way of life.

*Respondent 18.*—“They showed me the type of person that the Lord is. He’s with you through thick and thin. Their friendships have really helped me understand how the Lord walks with me side by side *even when I don’t feel it*” (emphasis added).

Differential association theory has traditionally emphasized the key role of friendship networks in the etiology of criminal behavior. This perspective, however, can be criticized along with control theory for its deterministic (“the gang made me do it”) assumptions (Shoemaker 1996). The criticism seems especially relevant when we focus on the adult phase of the life courses, in general, and the process of making significant changes to the life course, in particular. The narratives provide frequent illustrations of actors who appeared quite capable of discarding bad companions and redirecting friendship networks so that they are more in line with the new lifestyle.

*Respondent 19.*—“I don’t think that they [friends listed at the adolescent interview] to be honest, I don’t think that really they know Jesus, like I do, and they’re lost, kind of. I’d say that Donna and I are still both headed in the same direction. We want to love, love the Lord. We want to please the Lord. But Lorrain, her heart isn’t set on the things of the Lord right now [laughs]. I’m praying for her salvation. I used to let her talk me into anything, cause I wanted to please her so much. I just wanted a friend. She seemed to care about me, and I wanted somebody to love

me and be my friend. [But now] I tell her no. She has tried since then, and I tell her no. I can't do that stuff anymore" (30-year-old white female, separated from second spouse, employed part-time as a nursing assistant in a hospital).

In the discussion above, we indicated that while desistance did not inevitably follow from exposure to prison, treatment, or religious experiences, subsets of respondents within the sample did indicate that these experiences were important catalysts for changes they had made. We pointed out that successful redirection efforts frequently involved fundamental cognitive transformations—changes that then served to energize the actor's own agentic moves (e.g., "Being clean is a job you have to work on everyday"), and social realignments that further reinforced the actor's initial forays into more prosocial territory. Successful hooks for change offered more in the way of a blueprint for behavior and facilitated the development of an alternative view of self that was seen as fundamentally incompatible with criminal behavior. Next we apply this more "conditional-on-cognitive-transformations" perspective as we examine two hooks that figure even more prominently in the change stories, namely, children and the marital/intimate partner.

### *Children*

As noted in our earlier background discussion, Graham and Bowling (1996) found that for women in their British sample desistance often occurred abruptly and was tied directly to childbearing. Moore and Hagedorn (1999) found that the female Hispanic gang members they studied rarely went on to be arrested as adults. They also focused on the importance of having children for maturing out of gang involvement. We do not find this same inevitability with regard to child effects, even though children do figure heavily in respondents' change stories. The difference between our findings and those cited above likely stems from our focus on a sample of early-starting delinquents with a significant history of conduct problems. A majority of these young women and men went on to accumulate adult arrests, as well as to experience early and high fertility (Bowerman 1997). A focus on children as a hook for change is thus particularly useful as an illustration of our central argument—that when we focus on contemporary serious offenders, mere exposure to a given stimulus/catalyst is often not a sufficient bridge to conformity and sustained behavior change.

We have already quoted several examples that illustrate the lack of inevitability of a child effect—for example, the young woman who indicated that she "couldn't wait to get this baby out" so she "could run the street" or Nicole (discussed earlier) who had not been able to turn her

life around despite high attachment to three children, ages 11, 5, and 4 (see also Miller 1986). These are not isolated instances within the sample. We documented many child endangerment charges in our searches of police files and found that approximately 60% of the respondents located at the adult follow-up had never had or had lost custody of one or more of their biological children. Although the women in the sample were more likely to retain custody of their children than were their male counterparts (51% of the women reside with all children in contrast to 26% of the males), the family circumstances of these women and their children nevertheless contrast sharply with national norms (i.e., 92% of all U.S. children under 18 reside with their biological mother [Bachu and O'Connell 2000]).

While there has been an increased appreciation of the father's role in child development (Harper and McClanahan 1998), child care and rearing remains a highly gendered activity. These findings thus have implications for the well-being of the children born to those women within the sample who have continued their antisocial behavior into adulthood. In addition, societal sanction of women who have not fully engaged with the "press of nurturant role obligations" (Robbins 1989, p. 119) is also generally much stronger than that levied against comparable males, and both sets of realities are well recognized by the women in the sample. Thus, there are undoubtedly strong social desirability elements in the sections of the life stories relating to the respondents' children, as well as near universal interest on the part of the women in their children's well-being. Women's stories were, in fact, more likely to focus prominently on children as a hook for change.<sup>26</sup> But we observed considerable variability, even from the respondent's viewpoint, in the perceived influence of children on the respondent's own behavior. One group appeared to embrace wholeheartedly the good parent role but managed to disassociate their experiences as a good parent from their own deviant behavior.

*Respondent 20.*—"All my kids are on the honor rolls. My children have been through counseling, Family Focus. My kids will complete school. My kids will not be like I was. I am real strict. I might be a drug addict, and I may not get up but even if I'm not up, they will get up for school, dress proper for school, don't disrespect any teachers or anything like that. My children don't do that. Don't break the law. My girls don't even leave the back yard unless I take them" (30-year-old white female, widow,

<sup>26</sup> Approximately 26% of the women's narratives centered on children as a dominant theme (7% of the men's narratives). Men's stories also frequently referenced children, but this was more often described as an influence that intimately connected to the marital partner (e.g., "Mary and the kids"). Of the men, 28% described the importance of the "family" in this more general fashion, as contrasted with 18% of the women.

currently cohabiting, unemployed but works under the table, part-time factory labor at \$5.00 per hour).

Another set of respondents, however, clearly made the connection between the birth or maturation of their children and their own lifestyle changes. Motherhood creates possibilities for a change in self-conception, but the internalization of this new status is far from automatic. As we stated previously, even if respondents have imagined for themselves a different kind of self, and more generally a different kind of life, it is necessary that they come to “see” the old deviant behavior as fundamentally incompatible with this new persona. Thus, loving one’s children will not on its own be sufficient as a catalyst for long-term behavioral changes, unless this connection has been forged. One way respondents make this shift involves a reconfiguration of the meaning and impact of “shame.”

*Respondent 21.*—“Having a baby, that changed a whole lot of me. I know I had a responsibility and I mean if I did this wrong they would come and take him. I couldn’t imagine getting in trouble. I mean even spending the night in jail and having him know about it. Him growing up and saying, ‘oh my mom has been in jail. You know my mom drinks, she’s been in jail’ and this and that. I think that if I wouldn’t have had him, I probably would have gotten in trouble. Honestly, that really settled me down” (30-year-old white female, married, currently employed part-time as a loader in a factory earning \$12,500 a year).

Formal and informal network members may attempt to shame an actor into conforming, but the success of their efforts directly relates to the actor’s own receptivity to the shaming attempt. Thus while “shaming” has been associated with social control and labeling perspectives (see especially Braithwaite 1989), this notion contains a strong cognitive element as well. The mother quoted above indicates that she cannot imagine getting in trouble; yet, it seems crucial that she not only can, but has imagined it, including how the child might have to deal with a mother’s negative turn, what he might say to his friends, and the like. A symbolic-interactionist perspective on this process, then, highlights that such a shift in meaning is as important to the change process as is the behavior of agents of social control.

The ability to imagine a negative sequence of hypothetical consequences that might flow from one’s deviant behavior can have a deterrent effect. However, prospects for successful transitions may be enhanced when the actor also focuses on positive attributes of the parenthood (or any other) role. In her study of the transition into motherhood, McMahon (1995) found that a majority of the middle-class respondents in her sample experienced motherhood as a time of life-enhancing personal growth. For example, many of the women were surprised at the depth of their feelings after they had given birth, indicating that they were often “overwhelmed

by their emotions . . . as totally absorbed by their children; as though they had fallen in love” (McMahon 1995, p. 135). She contrasts this sense of personal transformation with themes of obligation and “settling down” encountered in interviews with working-class respondents. Nevertheless, in both groups, the women emphasized the rewards of their new status, including the feeling of “loving and being loved,” and enjoyment of the opportunities to “watch them grow and learn.”

In contrast, in this sample, many respondents’ stories that focus on children are dominated by negative themes. Both women and men comment on the importance of being a good parent largely as a kind of disaster avoidance strategy, rather than as a rewarding experience. Frequently, respondents recognize the potential for their children to experience the kind of negative family climates that almost universally characterized their own upbringing. Particularly as their children matured, they became more aware of the potential for the intergenerational transmission of negative outcomes.

*Respondent 22.*—“That’s why I’ve went all this time and not worked. I just didn’t want nobody else to have them. They’re too little and can’t tell for their self and once the damage is done it’s done and you can’t, you can always say you’re sorry but you can’t fix it” (29-year-old white female, married, unemployed).

*Respondent 23.*—“I don’t want them to have a father that’s not working, that’s on drugs, that’s a bum—can’t do anything for them. I know how living through that, I know how that makes me feel about my father. I didn’t want to do that to my kids” (29-year-old black male, married two times to the same person, currently divorced, employed full-time as computer operator earning \$20,321 a year).

*Respondent 24.*—“I didn’t want her to have to go through anything that I had to go through” (28-year-old white female, cohabiting, waitress earning \$2.15 per hour plus tips).

*Respondent 25.*—“It’s horrid out here. A lot of kids selling drugs and stuff and I don’t want that to happen to them” (30-year-old black female, divorced [lesbian], currently unemployed).

Although these respondents appear aware of the need to act differently from their own parents, those who cite positive themes about parenting appear better positioned to sustain their version of the good parent role. Our notion here is that “positives” will provide more in the way of forward motion and a sturdier base around which to build the replacement self. Stacy’s narrative (the second case in our previous discussion of structural linkages) contains extensive, detailed commentary about her desire to be available to raise her son, and she expresses an apparent delight in the basic activities involved in parenting:

Yeah, and I did a real rough bit [the last time in prison], not physically or anything but emotionally, because of this time when I went I had a little boy, and once he was born, it wasn't about me no more, you know, it was about him. It was a different scene. Yeah, and like, you know, I went to school last week. He had his first field trip. . . . Yeah and when I got, when he got off the bus I was standing there to go and help him go and carve his pumpkin and meet his teacher and all that, and he was telling all his little friends that's my mom. Yeah, and then I got to go to the playground, and it was a real neat experience.

The stories of respondents who have a longer track record as desisters reflect an even deeper level of commitment to the everyday challenges and rewards of the parenting role.

*Respondent 26.*—"I have children. Um, my oldest boy is an A/B student. And he's more of a critical thinker than anything. He'll think his way through anything. I give him situations often, as to what will happen if you're on the streets, you know, how would you approach it if somebody tries to walk up to you and tried to take your clothes. I tell him to come home naked. I am really blessed. He goes to kindergarten now, and he's doing very well. He stopping counting at fifteen, he needs to do better than that cause he can do better. I quiz my son. I make tapes for them to listen to in the car, um as far as my son and his ABCs, knowing them out of sequence . . . and do all kind of things. You've got to be very creative" (29-year-old black female, never married, cohabiting, unemployed).

In this case, then, the parent references daily concerns and actions to back up her claim to the good mother role. That she has included such a detailed discussion of this also suggests a level of self-consciousness about the role, however. Linde (1993) suggests that such detailed explanations within narratives occur as "interruptions" from a linguistic standpoint. They often signal areas that could be called into question; thus, the "explanations" are seen as ways to bolster a potential problem area. Obviously, the mother quoted above is cognizant of her own prior behavior and perhaps that of similarly situated others in her network. Thus her discussion of the motherhood role lacks the taken-for-granted qualities that might be found in the narratives of more consistently prosocial women. However, this also hints at the willful or agentic aspects of the transformation she has accomplished.

Consistent with our discussion of treatment and religion, children can serve an important focus around which to build network changes as well. This, in turn, would provide reinforcement for women's emerging identity transformations. However, as the excerpt below illustrates, a one-directional view of these social influences is inappropriate, because it brackets off the volitional underpinnings of many kinds of network memberships.

*Respondent 27.*—“My kids are so much the center of my life that I tend not to have a lot in common with the people who don’t have kids. And I even find with people who have kids that makes a link for awhile. But if that person is not as involved in their kids as I am in mine, then there’s, it’s like, my entire life is, you know, makin’ sure that meals are on time, lunches are packed, and this kid gets to softball and that kid gets to Girl Scouts and, you know, this one has piano lessons and that one . . . you know, it’s crazy. It’s like sometimes you get to be a taxi and I find that the strongest friendships that survive are with the mothers of the children that my children go to school with. Those are the mothers I build the friendships with, *the other involved mothers*” (emphasis added; 31-year-old white female, married, employed as a part-time certified nursing assistant making \$6.98 per hour).

By virtue of their age and inexperience, children must, almost by definition, serve an indirect role in changes that are made. At least in the early years, they cannot be considered a direct form of social control. Having a child creates possibilities for a reorientation of the self, but it is a self that must be actively embraced. Thus changes respondents attribute to their children and movement into parenthood afford particularly strong examples of the role of cognitive transformations in the change process. In addition, consistent with our discussion of changes associated with prison or treatment experiences, respondents are often specific about when and how these cognitive transformations occurred. For example, some indicate that this happened with the birth of their first child or as their children became increasingly aware with advancing age, while others named a specific later child they associated with a transformation. Respondents who had not yet forged any meaningful connection between their behavior and their child’s well-being contribute further variability regarding child effects. Thus, exposure to a new condition (in this case the presence of children), or even a high level of attachment to one’s children, does not on its own constitute a powerful impetus for desistance without some accompanying cognitive changes.

#### *The Marital Relationship*

Logically, marital partners could prove very powerful catalysts for changes in life direction. As an adult coresident, the marital partner would have numerous opportunities for immediate, recurring influence. While our quantitative findings did not show strong effects of marital attachment, for a subset of respondents, marriage was a central focus of their progressive story (24% of the women and 26% of the men). However, also contained within the sample are many other themes that do not square with the idea of a good marriage effect, and there are apparent gender

differences that prove a further complication. In this section, we first focus on stories that seem generally consistent with a social control perspective, but attempt to show how cognitive transformations can be seen as an integral part of the change process. Next, we consider stories that represent negative cases, including (a) respondents who report high marital attachment but who have not desisted from criminal activity, (b) those who report low-quality marriages but nevertheless associate them with movement away from criminal behavior, and finally, (c) those for whom the absence of romantic ties is associated with positive life changes. We suggest that these conceptual categories may be of particular significance because of our focus on female offenders.

The first example that supports the idea of a good marriage effect reads like a Cinderella story, in that the male partner is seen as instrumental in directing the respondent away from a very negative environment.

*Respondent 28.*—“He said that he felt, he said that he felt that when he first met me and he seen me, I didn’t belong where I was at. He said that he looked at me and he could tell that I did not belong. He said that ‘you don’t fit in. You don’t belong’” (30-year-old white female, married, unemployed). The interviewer asked for further clarification:

*Interviewer:* With the winos and that?

*Respondent:* Uh huh. He said that I didn’t belong and I didn’t fit in. It made a big difference, ’cause I started, I started realizing that what I was missing and everything that, the good life, I was missing out on the good life and I knew what I was doing was bad. I knew that what I was doing was bad and I was hanging around bad people and I was doing bad things and all. Donald was always positive. Everything he does is positive. Everything! I mean his peers, everything, the people he hung around with was like, firefighters, paramedics, them, them type of people. I mean people that got the family, the family-type people.

*Interviewer:* And you wanted that?

*Respondent:* Oh yes! I wanted that. I had more fun doing that.

*Interviewer:* Okay, so even though you had heroin on your back you were willing to get rid of that.

*Respondent:* Yes.

*Interviewer:* To be with Donald?

*Respondent:* Yes.

This respondent clearly identifies her partner as the primary catalyst for changes that she made, and her success in leaving behind a 13-year heroin habit offers concrete evidence of his positive impact. However, a key aspect of this transformation may have been the change in self-concept that the relationship fostered (“He said I didn’t belong where I was at”). In addition, while Donald provided an entrée into a world characterized



by prosocial connections (“firefighters,” the “family-type people”), it is a world the respondent definitely wanted to pursue.

Thus, even while women describe how their marriages have been influential in the social bonding and investment sense, the narratives provide a window on the initial movement into this “conventionalizing” relationship form. Laub, Nagin, and Sampson (1998) indicate that a certain amount of luck may be involved (e.g., in suggesting that marriage can be a chance event) or in pointing out that “good” things sometimes happen to “bad actors” (p. 2). The narratives we examined, however, reveal how the actor’s own orientations and actions are also important to an understanding of the mechanisms that eventuate in such positive effects.

Another good illustration is provided by the case of Dan [respondent 29], who estimated that he had had dozens of sexual partners, while never staying with any of the women longer than three months. After his most recent prison sentence, Dan stated that he was tired of the type of life he had been leading. Eventually he began cohabiting with Wendy, a very respectable woman who was adamant about living a clean lifestyle. However, it is difficult to consider his movement into such a relationship a matter of chance or luck, since Wendy had been part of his social network for many years (since he was about 16). When asked why he had initiated the relationship, he emphasized the difference between Wendy and the other types of women he had dated: “She was honest. I don’t know, she was just straight honest. There wasn’t 50 dudes trying to hook up with her. I just figured that we could make the best of it” (30-year-old white male, cohabiting, employed full-time as masonry worker earning \$27,100 a year).

These examples illustrate the role of actors in initiating or at least actively supporting relationships likely to foster positive changes. However, this active participation in the process relates directly to a second important consideration, namely the *partner’s normative orientation*. The life histories typically contain extensive accounts of not just one personal relationship forged by each respondent but very often a series of them. This larger set of others constitutes a broad range in terms of the partner’s levels of involvement in antisocial behaviors. Thus, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the success of desistance efforts will be greatly enhanced when the partner represents some level of contrast to the respondent’s previous orientation and lifestyle. In viewing such a partner as desirable and actively forging a relationship with this type of individual, the respondent has in effect demonstrated at least a modest cognitive shift (“I am the type of person who wants to associate with this respectable man/woman”). In addition, the contrasting partner provides a clear *blueprint* that facilitates the respondent’s ability to affect successful, lasting change. Thus it is important that the respondent is both tired of being dishonest

and now connected to someone who demonstrates what it means to be honest on a daily basis. The importance of this is shown by the following excerpt from Dan's interview. At this point, Wendy had entered the room, and contributed forcefully to the discussion:

*Dan:* I still have a lot of thieving friends. [But] see, the thieving friends I've got, I keep an eye on them pretty much and they don't come around a lot.

*Wendy:* And they know not to bring it [stolen property] here . . . and they know we won't have any of that. I don't want them bringing nothing hot to my house. And I don't buy nothing hot from them.

*Interviewer:* Why not?

*Dan:* It's, I don't know it's . . . kids, family, house.

*Wendy:* I don't allow nothing in my house.

*Dan:* other things . . . it's not even worth it any more, okay?

*Interviewer:* So you wouldn't tolerate that stuff in the house, even if it's something you all wanted?

*Dan:* no, she don't want . . .

*Wendy:* I don't want nothing hot! Nothing hot in the house! I don't want nothing that's hot, not in my house! And I'm not going to jail for something someone else does, cause I don't do it and I don't want it around my kids. I'm not going to have it.

*Dan:* Not without having a receipt for it, and its own packaging.

The exchange offers a very good example of the important role of social control processes. It seems clear that Wendy exerts strong external control ("I'm not going to have it"), and Dan even references an investment buildup ("it's not worth it . . . kids, family, house"). However, control theorists have historically argued that it is the nature of the bond rather than the normative orientation of reference others that is associated with a pattern of conformity (Hirschi 1969; Sampson and Laub 1993, pp. 190–91). We have previously critiqued this aspect of control theory, both on logical and empirical grounds (Giordano 1989; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Pugh 1986; Giordano et al. 1998), and we consider this position especially untenable as it relates to our focus here.

The idea that the normative orientation of the partner is critical to consider, however, is consistent with the basic tenets of differential association theory and with a more general theory of contrast outlined in prior work (Giordano 1995; Giordano, Longmore, and Manning 2001). Briefly, while most research on intimate social relationships emphasizes principles of similarity or homophily, elements of contrast may also provide an important context for individual growth and development (see also Matsueda and Heimer 1997). Simmel outlines a general basis for this idea: "For the actions of the individual, his difference from others is of far greater interest than is his similarity with them. If something is objectively of equal importance in terms of both similarity with a type and

differentiation from it, we will be more conscious of the differentiation” (1950, pp. 30–31).<sup>27</sup>

That relationships containing areas of difference can contribute to development seems especially useful for understanding the role of others in the *change* process. This hints at a high level of initial motivation and effort, because the actor must overcome the more generally observed tendency for partners to select one another on the basis of similarity (Krueger et al. 1998). The respondents quoted below, in describing how partners influenced their own behavior, focus squarely on the importance of this compare-and-contrast dimension.

*Respondent 30.*—“. . . cause I’d hate to get into any trouble and, you know, he’s a very straight and narrow type guy He’s a big guy, really big arms and he’s a workaholic. He’s a real calm guy. I’m the violent one and he’s really calm. He can take a lot” (30-year-old white female, cohabiting, unemployed).

*Respondent 31.*—“She’s a real goody-goody. She comes from a Catholic home, I mean real high principles” (29-year-old white male, married, employed full-time as manager at auto parts store earning \$29,000 a year).

*Respondent 32.*—“I don’t get into trouble any more (laughs). He is very, he is the total opposite of me. And he’s very quiet and calm and doesn’t make really rash decisions. So, some of that’s worn off on me (laughs)” (29-year-old white female, second marriage, employed full-time as secretary earning \$14,600 a year).

*Respondent 33.*—“We don’t go to bars and stuff. He don’t like bars. I used to love bars and I hate them now. They ain’t nothing but trouble and fights and diseases and, I mean, he made me realize a lot of stuff” (30-year-old white female, cohabiting, unemployed).

*Respondent 34.*—“Yeah, cause I mean, all the other guys I was ever with, was always drinking and drugging and drinking and drugs and that is all I knew. And he was totally different. It was new to me. I mean it was something that I wanted to experience and I liked it and I wasn’t always having to drink to be happy and do drugs to be happy” (31-year-old white female, cohabiting, unemployed).

These respondents consider it quite important that the partner’s be-

<sup>27</sup> Cooley ([1902] 1970, p. 380) makes a similar point in discussing how feelings about the self, such as pride or mortification, emerge from the looking glass: “The thing that moves us to pride or shame is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves, but an imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this reflection upon another’s mind. This is evident from the fact that the character and weight of that other, in whose mind we see ourselves, makes all the difference with our feeling. We are ashamed to seem evasive in the presence of a straightforward man, cowardly in the presence of a brave one, gross in the eyes of a refined one, and so on. We always imagine, and in imagining share, the judgments of the other mind.”

havioral repertoire is explicitly prosocial (“a real goody-goody”; “real high principles”), conventional (“he’s a workaholic”), and instructive in regard to different ways of handling life’s difficulties (“he’s a real calm guy”; “doesn’t make really rash decisions”). A comment such as “we don’t go to bars and stuff” is consistent with the idea of the partner as a source of informal social control. But through continued interaction and communication, partners can also have a key role in redefinition processes. Certain prosocial modes of behavior come to be seen as more attractive (“some of that has rubbed off on me”), while the deviant behavior loses some of its former luster (“I used to love bars now I hate them”; “I wasn’t always having to drink to be happy and do drugs to be happy”).

Although examples of positive contrast can be found within the narratives of both women and men, it is quite possible that our focus on female offenders provides us with a particularly heightened sense of the importance of this variable. Given the known gender distributions of involvement in criminal activity, a reasonable expectation is that males who have forged a heterosexual relationship will—on average—have moved in the direction of a more prosocial set of influences. This same assumption cannot be made for women—and particularly for the highly marginal women who make up this type of sample. Thus, a critical set of negative cases with regard to the good marriage effect consists of individuals strongly bonded to deviant partners. Descriptions of these negative influences are, not surprisingly, most unsparing when they reference a past relationship.

*Respondent 35.*—“We used a lot of drugs together. That was the basis of our relationship” (30-year-old black female, never married, unemployed).

*Respondent 1.*—“He always was looking for the easy way out. Always wanted to cheat somebody, always wanted to get around things, never wanted to live up to responsibilities . . . took too many risks and chances and it was just not right.”

However, current relationships also vary along this dimension, and this variation appears to strongly influence present lifestyles. To illustrate, the respondent quoted below indicated on the structured portion of the interview that she was “completely satisfied” with her relationship with her fiancé, even though they both had been charged recently with drug trafficking and child endangerment. This example shows that love and interdependence (bonding) does not, in the absence of information about the partner’s normative orientation, necessarily lead to a process of desistance.

*Respondent 36.*—“Well, he’s in a correctional institution right now. Because of us being arrested. He plea bargained to a higher plea bargain and I plea bargained to a lower plea bargain so we would get less time

instead of going through a jury trial. But as soon as he comes home we're going to get married" (28-year-old white female, never married, unemployed).

A second type of negative case is represented by respondents who score low on the structured questions indexing marital attachment but who nevertheless associate their marital relationship with the movement toward a more conforming lifestyle. This scenario also appears more frequently in the narrative accounts of women than men in our sample and thus constitutes another way in which these processes appear to be gendered. In such cases, the women focus primarily on the importance of their *own role* as wife (often in connection with their role as mother), rather than the nature of the marital bond. Nevertheless, the husband is a technical requirement of their ability to enact it.

*Respondent 20.*—"I've knew him all my life. Just about, since I was about 13. . . . I don't actually believe I'm in love with him, but he's the father of my children and there ain't no boy gonna walk up to my door and think my girls ain't got a dad."

The distinction between attachment and respectability is even more clear in the case of the respondent quoted below. In both the structured and open-ended interviews, this wife rated her marital relationship as unhappy. During the interview, the intrusion of the husband into the background provides a window on the nature of their relationship. At first, the husband can be heard faintly in the background referring to his wife's friends as "fat ugly sluts." This triggered the following exchange:

*Respondent 27:* My husband doesn't like her and she doesn't like my husband. But then nobody likes my husband.

*Husband:* I don't let her go out to the bar and drink with her fat little girlfriends no more.

*Respondent:* Hey, hey, we've already determined that you don't like anybody and nobody likes you, OK?

Such examples show that marriage can be conventionalizing in its effects even in the absence of high attachment. Perhaps these women (and, more rarely, men) could be conceptualized as making a kind of trade. That is, they appear to have self-consciously *given up* on things (including, in some instances, their own emotional well-being) to *get* a lifestyle that contains these elements of stability and conventionality. This places their conception of their role and their desire to develop and maintain it (rather than the husband's behavior or the nature of the attachment bond) at the center of the change process. In describing the nature of this role, many women outline family circumstances that are highly traditional in form and content.

*Respondent 37.*—"I think he's the one smarter when it comes to making

decisions, so I'm influenced by that because I feel like if I make a decision I feel like he could make a better one. The man of the house, I think of it in that way. He seems to look at the problem in different areas that I don't. So, it seems like he always comes up with the better answer. You know, I make him pick the meat out at the grocery. I can't go to the grocery and pick the meat out" (30-year-old white female, married, not currently employed, currently receiving government assistance). The interview continued:

*Interviewer:* He kind of makes all the decisions then?

*Respondent:* Right.

*Interviewer:* OK. How much do you think you influence him? And like in what ways do you think you might influence him?

*Respondent:* Uh, I think that I make him feel that he can come home, come home to a clean house, and his laundry's done, and there's food here for all of us and just come home to a nice atmosphere, you know. You have a home to come to, since he is on the road a lot, and come home. I always have dinner and stuff for him, you know, so uh, you know just being the wife, you know, just taking care of him. So, yeah, so I suppose that's how he's influenced by me.

These traditional gender arrangements undoubtedly relate in part to the social-class origins of the majority of our respondents. However, these women may also view their current situations as preferable to earlier, much more unstable sets of living circumstances. Thus, in making a significant shift in life direction, the women may embrace very traditional incarnations of the wife role for the structure and clarity of role definition that it does offer (our notion of a blueprint).<sup>28</sup>

In contrast, some women, faced with the prospect of continued involvement with antisocial men or highly traditional relationships such as those described above, focused on their independence as a central theme. Investment in a high-quality marriage (we would add "to a prosocial spouse") may represent an ideal, in terms of its life-changing potential and from the standpoint of what is seen as culturally appropriate. Nevertheless, for the women we have focused on in this study, it is an ideal that many have found difficult to realize. Thus, a final set of negative cases for the good marriage effect consists of women who lack a marital or relationship connection of any kind, but who take pride in what they

<sup>28</sup> Since the Gluecks and Sampson and Laub relied on a composite measure of marital attachment derived from interviewer assessments, it is quite possible that such assessments were influenced by the degree to which the bond appeared to contain elements of respectability/traditionality. In contrast to our emphasis here, the statistical analysis reported in table 1 considered only the respondent's self-reported contentment or happiness with the relationship, a difference that could at least partially account for the discrepancy between our findings and those obtained by Laub and Sampson.

have been able to accomplish alone. While much has been written about the centrality of social relations in women's lives, for some women, including this subset, growth and development can also be seen as evolving from a break with connectedness, not because of it. The recognition of the need to make such a break represents another kind of cognitive transformation.

The respondent (1) we quoted above who described her partner as "someone who always wanted to cheat somebody," seemed keenly aware of the marriage ideal. However, she also appeared realistic about her current single status: "I've hoped and always wanted to have the TV-land type of family and that's what I would like to have, but I know that everything is not as perfect as they showed on TV." Later, asked about her future plans, she stated simply that she expected to be "a single mother, mother and her child for the rest of her life." When asked about her level of happiness now compared to earlier in life, she offered an assessment that can be considered both realistic and agentic: "Happier because I have the control now to see where I'm going, what happens to me compared to then . . . never knew you know what was going to go on or where I was going to be or what was going to happen to me. I, I can make them things [happen] now."

## CONCLUSIONS

Longitudinal studies of the youth-to-adult transition typically include few chronic offenders, and the number of young women with a significant history of conduct problems is particularly small as a percentage of the total population of adolescents. Such young people are an important subgroup to study, however, because the individual and social costs of their actions are particularly high. The Gluecks' (1968) follow-up study was unusual because it resulted in a large volume of data collected on 500 "truly" delinquent boys, all of whom had spent time in a state reformatory. Our longitudinal study of young women offenders employed a similar inclusion criterion; thus Laub and Sampson's analyses of the Gluecks' data and their theory of informal social control have provided a useful contrast with our findings and theoretical perspective.

### Desistance: A Gendered Process?

Neither the quantitative nor qualitative findings lend themselves easily to presentation as a set of binary (gender) oppositions (Thorne 1993). Regression analyses revealed that level of attachment to a marital/intimate partner and job stability were not strongly related to the likelihood of

desistance for either male or female respondents. In considering the contrast between our findings and those of Sampson and Laub, both the greater racial heterogeneity of the sample and differences in life experiences between the 1950s and the 1990s were discussed as possible explanations. Indeed, early on, Sampson and Laub (1993) suggested that a particular value of their analyses was that “the historical context of the data can serve as a baseline to identify areas where research findings are consistent across time and, equally important, to identify areas where contemporary research may diverge” (p. 625). Unlike the men of the Glueck sample, few of our respondents, whether male or female, were married and had full-time employment at the time of the follow-up (1995–96); and African-American respondents were particularly unlikely to have accessed this traditional respectability package. An even smaller percentage had accumulated the total “high quality” package. Consistent with Sampson and Laub’s emphases, however, we also found that the subset of respondents whose lives included these traditional elements of social capital/control were less involved in crime than others with either partial or no elements of the package. Interactions by gender were not significant.

In other analyses (see, e.g., Giordano, Cernkovich, and Lowery 2001), we point out a variety of ways in which the women offenders’ adult lives differ significantly from those of their male counterparts. However, in our focus here on desistance processes, we observed that the repertoire of hooks for change men and women elaborate, the language they use, and the descriptions of the entire change process overlap to a considerable degree. These female and male respondents do have things in common: low educational achievement, dysfunctional family backgrounds, extreme poverty, bad companions, marginal and shifting housing arrangements, repeated contacts with criminal justice and mental health professionals/facilities, and exposure to an array of treatment modalities. Perhaps we should not be surprised, therefore, that their “stories of change” draw from similar discourses and even develop common themes.

Nevertheless, our analysis also points to potential areas of gender difference that warrant additional research scrutiny, ideally using larger, more heterogeneous samples. For example, women were more likely than men to describe religious transformations and to focus heavily on their children as catalysts for changes they had made. Men more often assigned prominence to prison or treatment, or focused on family more generally (the wife and kids). Additional research on specific hooks for change would ideally be carried out using a variety of samples, including data that contain a sufficient number of serious male and female offenders to allow for meaningful analysis. A basic concern is that the processes associated with desistance among high-end or serious offenders may not be identical



to those identified through analyses of data derived from general youth samples. This is an especially important consideration when exploring gender issues. For example, while childbearing may indeed emerge as a key factor related to “maturing out” of deviance or drug use among women who are included in cohort, school, or neighborhood-based studies, our data show that this was far from universal among the serious female offenders who compose our sample group.<sup>29</sup>

More research is also needed on hooks that lacked prominence within the narratives, notably, career or employment. Many of the women who were more successful as desisters crafted highly traditional replacement selves (e.g., child of God, the good wife, involved mother) that they associated with their successful exits from criminal activities. Nevertheless, such identities, even if accessible, could be considered quite limiting in other respects. In many instances, the women appeared to have used their “agency” only to become enmeshed in life circumstances that could be characterized as highly repressive and lacking any means to become economically self-sustaining/independent (e.g., “he don’t trust me around men . . . he don’t want me being around men”; “he don’t like me to work at all”). And as the employment information we provided about the respondents attests, those women who do work are primarily employed in unstable service sector jobs earning extremely low wages (Giordano, Cernovich, and Lowery 2001). As a variety of scholars have noted, our economy has been shifting to a technological base, potentially marginalizing these women to an even greater extent (see, e.g., Lipset and Ray 1996). More basic research on the life course experiences of highly disadvantaged women will undoubtedly add to the growing theoretical interest in the intersections of various types of disadvantage and increased recognition within feminism that women’s standpoints and challenges vary considerably.

#### Suggestions for Further Theory Building and Integration

We have concentrated primarily on the women respondents in this analysis, but conjectured that “a theory of cognitive transformation” may also be a useful framework for understanding how it is that men manage to desist from criminal activity. An argument could be made that a perspective emphasizing cognitive processes, language, and identity work

<sup>29</sup> We will soon complete an additional wave of interviews with these respondents and all their adolescent children in which the central objective is to specify in more detail connections between parental deviance, parenting practices, and variations in child well-being. However, these interviews should also add to our understanding of the reciprocal process on which we focused in this analysis (children as an influence on desistance).

will be more relevant for understanding changes women make, while control variables will prove more effective as explanations of men's desistance (i.e., women decide to change and move in the direction of hooks that will allow them to achieve a more conforming lifestyle, while men may require more social pressure or incentive). This would also be consistent with the idea that society stigmatizes deviant women more strongly (Braithwaite 1989; Harris 1977; Schur 1984); thus on a average, women may be more receptive to any opening they come to see as available within the environment.

We would argue against the idea of a complete bifurcation in theory development, however, based on the following considerations. First, in contrast to the era in which the Glueck men came of age, the respondents in our sample matured into adulthood during a time when both women and men were less constrained by tradition and faced less favorable economic prospects (considering their low levels of education and their prior criminal histories). Minorities (an important group to consider, given their overrepresentation in the criminal justice system) appeared to have faced even greater disadvantage. Precisely because traditional sources of social control and capital seemed to be in relatively short supply, it may be useful to conceptualize both female and male offenders as needing to be—to a greater extent than previous generations—the architects, or at least the general contractors of their own desistance.

In addition, male respondents, like their female counterparts, were frequently heavily involved in criminal and drug cultures that seemed to be more encapsulating and limiting of life chances—thus a high level of individual motivation or “up-front” commitment would seem to be required for successful and long-lasting change. The argument we developed regarding women should extend to many male offenders. Among highly advantaged men, a show of agency is not all that necessary. At an exceedingly high level of disadvantage, cognitive transformations and associated agentic moves are unlikely to be nearly enough. We positioned our theory in “the middle,” a structural location occupied by a majority of the men and women in our study.

Finally, we argued that this more self-conscious perspective is consistent with the greater freedom of movement and choice-making possibilities characterizing adulthood. If we accept the notion that adult males have even more degrees of freedom than comparably situated women, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that male desistance would also entail a significant volitional or agentic component. For example, research on the transition from cohabitation to marriage has found that the decision to marry is driven more by male attitudes and preferences than by the female partner's perspective (Brown 2000; Manning and Smock 1995). Thus, if a contemporary adult male offender moves into marriage (in general, and

particularly to a prosocial partner) it is quite likely that this step reflects a level of intentionality and personal preference.

Aside from questions of generalizability, additional research could add depth to our understanding of concepts that have been sketched out quite tentatively in this analysis. For example, we outlined four types of cognitive transformations and suggested a hypothetical sequence in which these transformations may occur. This sequence could be documented or discarded and other types of cognitive shifts identified. We have also greatly oversimplified the connection between changing cognitions and associated agentic moves. Additional research could explore why some individuals who appear to have experienced significant cognitive shifts are nevertheless unable to move their behaviors into good alignment with them. We found high levels of psychological distress within our sample (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Lowery 2001), and this might be one factor associated with inability to move in the direction of hooks with good conventionalizing potential.

In the present analysis, we have also bracketed off the entire arena of the emotions—an obvious limitation of our emphasis on cognitive processes. Emotional and corporeal processes undoubtedly play important roles in the basic change mechanisms and are likely even more important to consider as they relate to *derailments* or setbacks (Shilling 1999). Thus, future theory and research should add attention to emotions as they affect behavioral change directly or, indirectly, as they influence the nature and timing of cognitive shifts.

Although our theory of cognitive transformation is admittedly quite provisional, we believe our focus adds to an understanding of desistance mechanisms. Individuals vary in what they bring to the change process, including differences in preferences and levels of motivation. The idea that there is a dynamic interplay between the individual and catalysts for change helps explain why some individuals exposed to a given catalyst (or an entire arsenal of catalysts) fail to hook onto them, others find success at time Y when they have failed miserably at time X, and still others manage successful changes using very limited resources.

In addition, the hooks themselves can be seen to vary in their transformative potential. These variations also link to cognitive processes. Successful hooks tend to provide the actor with a detailed plan of action or a fairly elaborate *cognitive blueprint* for proceeding as a changed individual. It is also beneficial if hooks contain a *projective* element directing the actor's attention toward present and future concerns. Related to this, hooks that are associated with *positive themes* and link in straightforward ways to prosocial normative repertoires will fare better. More useful hooks for change will not only provide the actor with new definitions and replacement behaviors, but will offer at least the broad outlines of a sat-

isfying, conventional *replacement self*—one that is seen as fundamentally incompatible with continued deviation. Finally, hooks for change will be more successful when they provide a *gateway to conforming others* who can reinforce the actor's initial forays into more prosocial territory. This notion is entirely consistent with the traditional sociological emphasis on the influential role of the social network. But here we have showcased the volitional or agentic aspects of movement toward these potentially helpful affiliations. Particularly as we focus on adult friendships and romantic liasons, the individual has an important role in selecting others who have the potential to be good influences, while “knifing off” undesirable companions (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994).

As we stated at the outset, the perspective we outlined is generally compatible with Sampson and Laub's (1993) theory of informal control, and the two perspectives can profitably be integrated. Indeed, figure 1 shows that these processes often coalesce and contain many areas of conceptual overlap. One area of incompatibility, however, is Sampson and Laub and other control theorists' focus on the nature of the attachment bond, as contrasted with our emphasis on the normative repertoire of reference others (whether the spouse or other network members). Clearly, when we consider the array of romantic liasons of the women in this sample, we must reject the notion that such attachments will necessarily prove beneficial to the desistance process. There also appeared to be significant variation in the prosocial potential of the various wives and girlfriends of male respondents, and this could prove even more variable in future eras. We believe that our ideas about the benefits of a spouse who offers a level of contrast add an important condition to Sampson and Laub's concept of a “good marriage effect.”

It may be even more useful to combine some of the ideas we developed here with Sampson and Laub's focus on an investment buildup. We agree completely with the key premise that highly invested actors will develop a strong stake in conformity and will not wish to jeopardize what they have accumulated by reverting to criminal activity. Across a variety of time periods and different sample groups, it is likely that a good marriage relationship combined with a stable job will continue to form the most solid basis around which to build a more prosocial way of life. However, we have emphasized here that individuals need a minimum level of resources to draw on in order to begin such a transformation process. Individual and cultural preferences, constraints, and opportunities will figure into the kind of strategies adapted (that is, some offenders may have to work with only parts of the respectability package or rely on different hooks for change entirely). Actors themselves must recognize the need to start “saving” and develop a high level of commitment to the plan. They may also call on help from others—ideally, professionals or others in the

network who have a stronger portfolio of prosocial behavior. These others can provide structure and guidance all along the way. Over time, actors will not only have built up a meaningful level of savings, but will actually come to enjoy the investing process. In turn, they will refrain from criminal or deviant behavior, not just because they have much to lose, but also because they have begun to look back with increasing disdain on their former spendthrift ways. These individually and socially structured differences in motivation and preference, the processes of interaction and communication that solidify them, and the gradual redefinitions that result are arguably as important as the “stake” itself. Indeed, they help us to understand how and why the buildup occurs. However, we also recognize that the product of all these dynamic processes is enhanced *internalized control*, perhaps the most important type of cognitive transformation.

#### APPENDIX A

##### *Descriptions of Independent Variables*

*Sociodemographic characteristics.*—Three variables were included: respondent’s *age* in years at the time of the follow-up interview, *gender* (female = 1), and *race* (African-American = 1).

*Family background.*—All family background variables except abuse history were assessed at wave 1. *Parents’ socioeconomic status* was computed using Hollingshead and Redlich’s (1958) two-factor index of social position, which considers both occupation and education in the computation of a single SES score. Parental occupations as reported by the respondents were coded according to the Census Bureau’s Index of Industries and Occupations (Bureau of the Census 1980). For each respondent, education was weighted by a factor of 4 and occupation by a factor of 7; then the two scores were summed to form a single SES score. Father’s education and occupation were used to compute SES scores except when the father did not live in the household; in those cases, mother’s education and occupation were used in the computation. Scores ranged from 15 (where a low score reflects high SES) to 69. *Family size* is derived from the question, “How many people, including yourself, live in this household?” *Physical and sexual abuse* as a child and adolescent were assessed with a retrospective scale administered during the follow-up interview (Boyer and Fine 1992). The items composing the *physical abuse* scale asked whether the people who were caring for the respondent while they were growing up ever did any of the following (yes = 1): “spank you with a belt or strap”; “hit you with an object, like a stick”; “hit you with a closed fist”; “throw you against the wall”; “physically injure you in any other way”; “deprive you of food or clothing as punishment”; or “lock you

in a closet or outside for long periods of time.” The score represents the sum of the six items and ranges from 0 to 6 ( $\alpha = .72$ ). The items for the *sexual abuse* scale assessed whether individuals who were caring for the respondent while they were growing up ever did any of the following: “make you do something sexual that you did not want to do”; “make you touch their breasts or genitals, or touch yours when you did not want them to”; “make you look at them naked, or look at you naked, or ever take sexual photographs of you, when you did not want them to”; “try unsuccessfully to have sexual intercourse with you when you didn’t want to by either using force or threatening to use force”; “force you to have sexual intercourse either because someone used force or threatened you with physical violence”; and “get you to have sexual intercourse when you did not want to because they had given you alcohol or drugs.” The range is from 0 to 6 ( $\alpha = .86$ ). *Parental supervision* was created using three items that assessed the level of control parents had over the respondent’s activities outside the home. The items asked how much respondents agreed or disagreed with the following statements: “My parents want to know who I am going out with when I go out with other boys”; “In my free time away from home, my parents know who I’m with and where I am”; and “My parents want me to tell them where I am if I don’t come home right after school.” The final parental supervision variable is the average of respondents’ scores for each of the items. The range is from 1 to 5, with 5 reflecting a high level of supervision ( $\alpha = .62$ ). *Attachment to family* in adolescence was assessed via a 6-item scale, which includes items drawn primarily from the National Survey of Youth (Gold and Reimer 1972). These items measured how much the respondent agreed or disagreed with the following statements about their relationship with their parents: whether or not parents asked about what the adolescent was doing in school; whether parents gave the right amount of affection and trust; whether adolescents were close to their parents and would not want to let them down; and whether parents were proud of the adolescent’s accomplishments. The scale score range is from 1 to 5 ( $\alpha = .80$ ).

*Adolescent behavior indices.*—The third set of independent variables reference respondents’ antisocial and prosocial behaviors in adolescence and were all derived from wave 1 responses. *Self-reported delinquency* is a 27-item modified version of Elliott and Ageton’s (1980) scale, similar to the dependent variable adult criminal involvement. Each item was assigned a ratio-score seriousness weight (Wolfgang et al. 1985). The total delinquency score is the mean of the sum of the products of each item’s frequency and its seriousness weight. Respondents’ delinquency scores range from 4.78 to 119.92 ( $\alpha = .92$ ). *Attachment to school* is a scale composed of two items derived from Minor (n.d.): “I wish I could drop out of school”; and “I feel as if I really don’t belong at school.” Responses

were coded so that a high score indicates a high level of attachment. The scale scores range from 1 to 5 ( $\alpha = .87$ ). *School achievement* is assessed using the question, "What grades do you usually get in school?" Responses ranged from 1 ("mostly F's") to 9 ("mostly A's").

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