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**Life-Course Criminology and Desistance from Crime:
What Consists of a Good Marriage and are the Effects Gender Specific?**

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ABSTRACT

Criminology is the science of studying crime on individual and societal levels. The area of life-course criminology seeks to understand how an individual begins in crime, persists, and eventually desists, and how desistance is achieved throughout the entire course of a person's life. Desistance may be accomplished through a number of ways within the confines of a marriage, from the cultivation of a strong marriage environment with strong attachments and commitments between spouses, to marriage simply functioning as the mechanism to replace one's previous deviant friends. While there is a large body of knowledge explaining how desistance is achieved through marriage for men, the literature pertaining to women is very small. In addition to these gendered differences in research, the specific properties of what consists of a "good marriage" are missing from the literature to date.

INTRODUCTION

Life-course criminology seeks to understand the onset of crime, continuity or persistence in crime, and eventual desistance from crime throughout the entire course of a person's life. John H. Laub and Robert J. Sampson have made great contributions and advancements in the area of life-course criminology. Their follow-up study and analysis of Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck's groundbreaking study of the lives of 500 delinquent men up to age 70 is one of the most impressive longitudinal studies of crime and desistance to date.

The central thesis behind Laub and Sampson's work is that eventually men desist from crime as they age, particularly with the help of what Laub and Sampson define as "turning points". These turning points are major life events that assist one in desisting from crime. Laub and Sampson, as well as other scholars, have identified marriage, employment, and military service, among other events, that serve to effect desistance throughout the course of one's life by means of informal social control. There is some debate over how marriage produces desistance from crime though. There are many studies of the effects of marriage on desistance, though a majority of the studies focus only on men, such as Laub and Sampson (2003). This paper summarizes a small part of the literature regarding the ways in which marriage affects desistance and identifies the paucity of studies on how marriage influences desistance for women, as well as other deficits in previous research.

PREVIOUS WORKS ON MARRIAGE AND DESISTANCE

Marriage has been identified as a significant force in aiding in desistance from crime (Blokland and Nieuwbeerta 2005; Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995; Laub and Sampson 1998; Li and MacKenzie 2003; Maume, Ousey, and Beaver 2005; Sampson and Laub 1990, 1993, 1995; Sampson, Laub, and Wimer 2006; Warr 1998). In fact, in his study of persistent thieves, Shover (1996) claims that the "successful creation of bonds with conventional others . . . is the most important contingency that causes men to alter or terminate their criminal careers" (p. 129). Blokland and Nieuwbeerta (2005) found that "during marriage offenders seem maximally inhibited; no other life circumstances equal the effect of marriage" (p. 1228). Thus, as Laub and Sampson (2003) have stated, marriage is a key turning point in facilitating desistance from crime. However, what is not clearly explained or identified are exactly what aspects of marriage aid in the desistance process. Laub and Sampson have maintained that the marriage relationship alone is the key to producing desistance. This means that the strength of the relationship between husband and wife is more important than the fact that they are married. Other scholars, such as Warr (1998), have concluded that marriage produces an environment which changes the peer associations of the participants within the marriage. Essentially, marriage causes men to terminate their friendships with those who they were previously involved with in criminal pursuits. This change in friendship allows desistance to take place as a result of the marriage environment. These different theories will be discussed in greater detail later.

There have been attempts to narrow down specific aspects of a marriage that enhance the desistance process. These studies have sought to identify the impact of several different areas, such as the impact of having children (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; Blokland and Nieuwbeerta 2005; Broidy and Cauffman 2006; Uggen and Kruttschnitt 1998), the effects of the marriage environment and interaction with others (Warr 1998), the attachment or bond between spouses (Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998; Laub and Sampson 1990, 2003; Johnson and Booth 1998; Maume et al. 2005; Sampson et al. 2006; Sampson and Laub 1990), and how marriage affects one's social networks outside of the marriage (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Holland 2003; McGloin et al. 2007; Osgood et al. 1996). Though these studies provide rich insight into how different aspects of a marriage affect desistance, there are many other mechanisms within the marriage environment that are left unexplored.

A missing link in the study of marriage and desistance is the lack of longitudinal studies specifically designed for women. Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck pioneered the research on 500 delinquent and 500 non-delinquent males that Laub and Sampson later analyzed and followed-up on to produce their two books: *Crime in the Making: Pathways and Turning Points through Life* and *Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives: Delinquent Boys to age 70*. The Glueck's paralleled their longitudinal studies of delinquent men with a study of 500 delinquent women in the 1920s, which was only followed up on for five years. Broidy and Cauffman (2006) analyzed the Glueck data from this female study and explained how some of the results they obtained from the Glueck data are due to the social and historical contexts of the era when the study was originally conducted. Thus, a significant problem with this particular female study is its age. There are more recent longitudinal studies which collect data for both men and women, such as the National Youth Survey which was started in 1977. The American society and way of life has changed drastically since the 1920s and 1930s and so have criminals and the methods they employ in criminal endeavors. A current longitudinal study modeled after the Glueck's studies for both men and women may yield more accurate and applicable results for our society today.

Another analysis missing in the current literature is whether marriage is effective in facilitating desistance for deviant women as it has been shown to do for deviant men. This concept is addressed briefly by Laub and Sampson (2003) as they state that "given the crime differences between men and women, it is almost invariably the case that men marry 'up' and women 'down'" (p. 45). This suggests that women are more likely to marry "down" to deviant or criminal partners and less likely to accomplish desistance through marriage while it is evident that most men, even chronic male offenders, enter into successful marriages and subsequently reap the benefits of desistance through marrying "up" to a woman (Laub, Sampson, and Nagin 1998). Men and women appear to introduce different influences in the marriage when examining the gendered effects of marriage and desistance.

Leverentz (2006) conducted a female study on the effects of marriage and cohabitation with men and found that marriage did not produce the same level of desistance for deviant women as has been found for deviant men. A point of consideration is the women in this study did not marry prosocial, or conventional, men. In fact, the women in Leverentz's study were often introduced to criminal activity by the men they married or cohabitated with. There was never an instance of women introducing

men to crime given in the life-history narratives in Laub and Sampson (2003). Often the wives of these men were essential elements of the desistance process. One of these men, Leon, shared how a date with his wife prevented him from going to prison with one of his former friends. Leon had a date with his wife on the night of a murder perpetrated by a close friend and claimed, "If it weren't for my wife I'd probably be up for murder" (Laub and Sampson 2003:121). Hence, this is why attachment to a conventional spouse is significant in achieving desistance (Giordano et al. 2003; Broidy and Cauffman 2006). Another problem with Leverentz's (2006) study is that marriage among the women studied was very low. Most women were cohabitating with men, particularly men who were still active in criminal careers. In addition, cohabitation has been shown to be less successful than marriage in producing desistance in some studies (Horney et al. 1995; Alarid, Burton, and Cullen 2000). While some studies show marriage can be beneficial in bringing about desistance for women, several studies have found that marriage alone has almost no impact on facilitating desistance for women (Alarid et al 2000; King, Massoglia, Macmillan 2007; Uggen and Kruttschnitt 1998). Giordano et al. (2002, 2003) found that marriage alone did not produce desistance for women, but found that desistance was contingent upon a strong marital relationship and marriage to a non-deviant male. However, this result is not limited to women. Simons et al. (2002) found that men in relationships with antisocial women resulted in increased criminal offending.

John H. Laub and Robert J. Sampson have contributed some of the most thorough and convincing work on the effects of marriage on desistance. Overall, Laub and Sampson approach the marriage and desistance relationship through a theory of social control. Specifically, Laub et al. (1998) concluded that marriage is a form of informal social control which restricts men from participating in deviant activities. Laub and Sampson (2003) argue that the strength of the bond and commitment between husband and wife is more important than the actual marriage itself. Laub and Sampson's position on marriage would assume that if a man and a woman are cohabitating, but have a very strong relationship (such as would be found in a marriage between a husband and wife), then desistance should still occur regardless of the fact that they are not married. As previously mentioned, some studies have found that cohabitation is a deterrent to desistance. This conflict between the relationship of cohabitation and marriage leaves one to wonder what is it about cohabitation that limits the full effects of desistance? The absence of the permanent nature and commitment of the marriage institution may explain why cohabitation is less effective than marriage in producing desistance.

In a more recent study, Sampson et al. (2006) found some support for their claim that being in a stable and strong relationship aided desistance, regardless of whether the relationship was in marriage or cohabitation. In addition to this, Sampson et al. sought to discover whether marriage resulted in more crime reduction for the same man being married versus being unmarried. They found impressive reductions in crime associated with marriage. Sampson et al. (2006) also claim that "there is something about being married [for men], at least during the young adult years, that inhibits crime regardless of the quality of the marriage and even the criminal involvement of the spouse" (p. 499). This certainly was not the case in Leverentz's (2006) study on the criminal involvement of a woman's intimate partner. Perhaps this difference is why some have called for gender specific criminological theories (Li and MacKenzie 2003).

The influence of strong bonds within a marriage and creation of new social networks may be a reason why men desist from crime as well. As men enter into successful marriages, find new friends, and find success in other aspects of their lives, abstinence from crime becomes necessary in order to avoid damage to the personal capital accrued from success in relationships, employment, and other areas of one's life (Nagin and Paternoster 1994). Nagin and Paternoster (1994) define this personal capital as conventional commitments and attachments to any manner of things such as a marriage, education, or occupational training. Thus, men may simply choose to abstain from crime as a result of building personal capital, namely a strong marriage with a loving woman, in order to avoid damaging the status of their personal capital or losing it altogether.

Warr (1998) cites differential association with peers as the method in which marriage produces desistance, which is significantly different than the findings of Laub and Sampson and others. Desistance is facilitated through limited association with one's previous deviant peers as a result of cultivating a new friendship with one's spouse and new friends (McGloin et al. 2007; Osgood et al. 1996; Warr 1998). In other words, marriage dissolves or disrupts previous deviant friendships. Thus, desistance is possible as a result of spending less time with friends that one previously engaged in crime with. However, this disruption is not an automatic result of marriage (Giordano et al. 2003). In addition, Warr (1998) noted that desistance occurred following marriage. Marriage was not a result of men breaking ties with their deviant friends first. Men did not break off ties with their deviant friends before they were married; they married with deviant friends in place. The marriage then served to sever associations with deviant friends, which results in desistance. Warr (1998) found that of those who married with current delinquent friends, 78 percent of those who married severed ties with delinquent friends during the study versus 51 percent of men who remained unmarried. In considering the results of Warr's research and its implications for marriage and desistance for men, one finds little to no research conducted on whether these same results would be found for women who marry and sever ties with deviant friends.

Maume et al. (2005) sought to reconcile whether the effects of marriage were due to a reduction in associations with deviant peers or a product of strong marital bonds between husband and wife. Maume et al. (2005) found more support for Laub and Sampson's theory that strong bonds within a marriage account for desistance (from marijuana use) more than a reduction in deviant peers. Those in the study who began friendships with peers who smoked marijuana were less likely to desist from using marijuana, but marriage proved to be a significant factor resulting in desistance when controlling for peer associations. Overall, Maume et al. (2005) found that strong marital bonds were not explained by changes in the number of deviant peer associates. The limitation of this study is that desistance and marriage are measured by only one level of deviance-smoking marijuana.

Waite's (1995) study concerning the benefits of marriage may have possible implications for future research. Marriage was found to provide men with supervision which limited risk taking behavior (Nagin and Paternoster 1994), lead to better overall health and a longer life, and gave people something other than themselves to focus on. In addition, men were often found to be more productive as a result of being married. More importantly, marriage was found to increase wealth for couples as a result of having two

incomes, and men who were married were more productive at their work and received higher wages (Waite 1995). This may explain why men may desist from theft and property crimes upon entering a marriage. Since they are making more money, men have no need to resort to theft, burglary, and robbery in order to make ends meet. The effects that marriage has on realigning their focus from oneself to others may also aid in the desistance process. This concept is addressed by Laub and Sampson in their theory of employment as a turning point. One of the narratives Laub and Sampson (2003) present states, "Being able to spend money and not have to steal it. Being able to go to the store and buy something and not have to steal it. That's important in life . . . what changed my life is work" (p. 139). While this narrative is given specifically towards the importance of employment as a turning point, it may be possible to draw specific parallels between the impact of a successful marriage on gainful employment and concomitant desistance through future research. Specifically, the concept that two incomes in a marriage negates the need to steal in order to provide for one's needs, which in turn may lead to further success in employment and foster an atmosphere for desistance to take place.

In addition to the physical, emotional, and financial benefits of marriage, another potential event that may produce desistance is the birth of a child. While some studies have shown a link between having children and desistance (Graham and Bowling 1996; Moore and Hagedorn 1999), Giordano et al. (2002) found that having children failed to produce desistance, though nearly two-thirds of the participants in their study were unmarried. Sampson and Laub (1993) did not find that having children affected desistance. Warr (1998) found "the presence of children adds little or nothing to the effect of marriage itself" (p. 206). Blokland and Nieuwbeerta's (2005) study of the effects of life circumstance on offending found that "parenthood does not seem to influence the development of offending" (p. 1224). Uggen and Kruttschnitt (1998) found that children were a source of desistance, though it was second to education. These mixed results on the impact of children on desistance leave an opening for further research and clarification. Some of the previous studies illustrate the influence of children on desistance from single mothers and children born out of wedlock. Further research might focus more on whether having children within a conventional marriage helps facilitate the desistance process.

There are some controversial findings that surface from time to time that show in certain cases that marriage is less beneficial to the desistance process and may increase or foster criminal offending. This was touched on earlier as Simons et al. (2002) found that men who were in relationships with deviant women had higher rates of offending. Sampson et al. (2006) found that "men with criminal or deviant wives displayed higher crime rates", though they did warn that these results may reflect homophily (p. 496). Homophily certainly seems to be the case in Leverentz's (2006) study, as most of the women surveyed were romantically involved with men that were in similar situations regarding drug use, unemployment, or other life circumstances. Others have found marriage for females to be detrimental rather than beneficial at certain points in a person's life (Broidy and Cauffman 2006), or to foster criminality in certain types of crime (Alarid et al. 2000). These findings on marriage lend support to the theory that the strength of the relationship and marriage to a conventional spouse may be a critical component in achieving desistance through marriage.

Another controversial finding in some studies is that marriage is less beneficial for women overall. Women have a tendency to “marry down” to an equally deviant or more deviant partner and are less likely to gain the full benefits of marriage that men have been able to obtain (King et al. 2007). This may be because women have a harder time finding prosocial partners since men are involved in more crime than women (Giordano et al. 2003). Statistically speaking, this means deviant women are at a disadvantage for finding non-deviant men to secure a successful marriages with. This could be one significant reason why marriages are more successful in producing desistance for men than for women.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

As presented previously, there are two main theories that explain how desistance is accomplished through marriage for men. The first states that marriage limits the opportunities of men to associate with their delinquent friends. In turn, this results in desistance as men form new relationships with law abiding friends. The second states that marriage becomes a form of informal social control as a strong relationship between spouses is cultivated. Men are then less inclined to jeopardize their marriages by engaging in crime. Significant to this theory is that men marry women who are less deviant than themselves. This leads one to wonder whether these theories would hold the same for women in their marriages to men. Leverentz’s (2006) work illustrates that when women marry men who continue in crime there is little desistance resulting from the marriage. In addition, some women are often introduced to crime by the men they are in romantic relationships with. After the review of this literature it is still unclear whether the marriage of a deviant woman to a conventional man will produce the same level of desistance as has been shown for a deviant man who marries a conventional woman.

In reviewing the literature for this paper, one study mentioned the role of religion in aiding in desistance for individuals (Giordano et al. 2002). Active religious participation provided some individuals with association with positive role models and provided a way to replace deviant friendships with non-deviant friendships. Giordano et al. (2002) noted that individuals active in religion achieved desistance through cognitive processes as well as behavioral changes. Overall, the role of religious attachment within a marriage appears to be insignificant to the desistance process due to the lack of attention within existing literature, or perhaps the role of religious attachment has been overlooked in the past.

A consistent theme for most of the studies located for this review was the effect of marriage and other factors for heterosexual couples. The paucity of studies specific to females has already been identified and will be discussed further later. One area that appears to be nonexistent in the current literature is the possible effects of marriage and other life circumstances on homosexual couples. It is possible for marriage to have the same deterrent effect for homosexual couples? Could two deviant men, or women, garner the same benefits of marriage in the way that heterosexual men do with women? These questions could, and should, be addressed in future research as our society appears to be moving (slowly) towards greater tolerance of homosexual relationships and marriages. The impact of children within heterosexual relationships is debatable, but might this mechanism prove more beneficial for homosexual couples? Is the debate between Laub

and Sampson's stance that a strong marriage is more important versus Warr's stance that marriage alters friendships within the marriage applicable to homosexual couples? Research into these possibilities may give valuable insight into gender specific mechanisms for desistance from crime.

In reflecting upon how a marriage produces desistance, one is left to wonder exactly what conditions of a marriage produce desistance. Certainly desistance does not cause marriage to occur, nor does a marriage alone simply cause desistance to occur. If marriage encourages desistance, does divorce encourage offending? Does relocating away from deviant associates assist in producing desistance? On the other hand, does living close to family and other supportive social influences aid in terminating deviant relationships? Is a healthy sex life important in maintaining the marriage and creating the atmosphere for a strong marriage as argued by Laub and Sampson? Waite (1995) suggests that marriage can lead to increased happiness and better health. A healthy sex life may increase marital happiness and cohesion, which could start a chain reaction of success in marriage and employment for men, as previously discussed. Overall, what effect might any of these questions have on the overall strength and success of a marriage and any subsequent desistance from crime? Discussion of these conditions is beyond the scope of this review, though exploration into these conditions may yield some insight into how these conditions may or may not aid in desistance within a marriage. Again, many of the studies presented within this paper explain these variables for men only, leaving one to wonder as to the effect these variables may have on women's desistance. Future studies that examine the effects of these and other conditions on marriage may help explain exactly what it is about a marriage, aside from a strong marital bond and reduction in deviant friends, that produces desistance.

Realistically, there are possibly hundreds, if not thousands, of mechanisms or conditions of a marriage that could be studied that may produce some level of desistance from crime. For instance, a single study of an active sex life might yield results that show that high levels of desistance are correlated to couples engaging in intercourse several times a week. This would not necessarily yield any beneficial insight into how sex encourages desistance though. Several studies would need to be conducted in order to be useful in designing a form of treatment or crime control/rehabilitation policy. The mechanisms previously mentioned are a recommendation that may serve to further advance the knowledge into the marriage-desistance equation. Analysis of the proposed mechanisms, such as regular intercourse or religious affiliation, may find that these conditions of a marriage are insignificant in the desistance process. Of course, on the other hand, some of these mechanisms may be found to be beneficial to the desistance process.

A significant defect with the current literature on marriage and desistance is the paucity of female studies. While men are responsible for the majority of crimes committed and represent a majority of the prison population throughout the United States, women also commit crimes. The goal of criminological studies is to explain crime on a societal level, not just individual levels. This entails explaining how women begin in crime, persist in crime, and eventually desist from crime, in addition to men. Some scholars have raised the issue of creating gender specific studies of criminological theories. This may be a worthwhile pursuit, but, until then, current research should look to fill the current gaps in the existing literature on female studies.

Another significant problem with the research studied for this paper is the contradiction found between the different studies. Some studies found conditions such as having children or a spouse's previous or current criminal activities to impact desistance, while other studies did not. Some studies found that certain conditions exacerbated criminal offending for some men. The conflict found within the studies presented herein is a major defect within the current literature which limits a complete understanding of the effects of marriage on desistance.

Within its limited scope, this paper has attempted to identify some of the prominent research regarding how desistance is achieved through marriage. This paper has also attempted to address some of the weaknesses in the academic literature concerning the relationship between marriage and desistance, and provide possible avenues for further research to fill in the gaps in criminological literature. While there is some dissent concerning the ways in which marriage produces desistance, it is clear from the review of this literature that marriage is linked with successful desistance from crime for most individuals, however, the success of a marriage is dependent upon certain conditions of the marriage.

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