Transitions in Offending Trajectories; Shared Experiences of Juvenile Delinquents

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Abstract

Within life course theoretical perspectives of criminality, offending behavior is seen as trajectory with a series of transitions. While some Life Course researchers argued that offending behavior remains stable over a life time. Others maintain that critical life events such as marriage and stable employment may change offending trajectory. In this paper, the researcher addresses the question of how juvenile delinquents experiences at the Senior Boys Correctional Centre (SBCC) in Accra. – Ghana redirected their paths to conformity. Using a qualitative research design the researcher tracked and explored the lived experiences of ten juvenile delinquents in their young adulthood. Contrary to the expectation of Edwin Sutherland (1947), the findings revealed that in inmates groups individuals learn the values, attitudes, motivations as well as the rationalizations and techniques for desisting from crime.

Keywords: Transitions, life course, Desistance, friendship
1 Introduction

The life course has been defined as “pathways through the age differentiated life span,” where age differentiation “is manifested in expectations and options that impinge on decision process and the cause of events that give shape to life stages, transitions and turning points (Elder 1985, p.17 as in Sampson and Laub 1993). Two central concepts underlie the analysis of the life course dynamics, namely, trajectories and transitions. A trajectory can be conceptualized as a ‘pathway or line of development over life spans such as work, marriage, self esteem or criminal behavior. Trajectories refer to long-term patterns of behavior and are marked by a sequence of transition. Whereas transitions are marked by life events such as first job or first marriage that are embedded in trajectories and evolve over shorter life spans—“changes in state that are more or less abrupt” (Elder, 1985:31-32. As in Sampson and Laub 1993:8), trajectories usually involve a longer view of long –term patterns in a person’s life involving multiple transitions.

From the viewpoint of life course researchers, the roots of serious crime and delinquency can be traced in childhood and are the culmination of a long history of improper moral development (Siegel and Welsh 2005). According to Devers (2011:3), life course frameworks are built from the foundations of theories that examine why people commit crime and then seek to answer why people stop. In that light, most criminological scholars in recent times have concentrated most of their interest on how criminal behaviour develops overtime and they try to understand how social factors accounts for persistence and desistance from crime. Studies by Sampson and Laub (1993) Besani, et al., (2009), Blokland et al., (2005) Forrest, (2007) Laub et al., (1998) Laub and Sampson (2003) McMillin (2007) among others who examined the relationship between marriage and desistance found that married individuals are less likely to commit crime compared to those who are single. While the delinquents that Sampson and laub (1993) 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.

Studies by Besani, et al., (2009), Blokland et al., (2005) Forrest, (2007) Laub et al., (1998) Laub and Sampson (2003) McMillin (2007) among others that examine the relationship between marriage and desistance generally find that married individuals are less likely to commit crime compared to those who are single. From this trend of analysis in the desistance discourses, what has not been adequately addressed in research is what factors within the context of correctional institution changes offending trajectories. It is in the light of this reasoning that this study becomes relevant in filling our knowledge gaps on how pattern of interactions within a juvenile correctional institution triggered desistance.

2 Literature Review

While some group of scholars argue that criminal behaviour is stable across the life course, others argue that critical life events may cause some groups of persistent offenders to desist from crime. According to Devers (2011) criminal desistance refers to the end of offending among those who have committed crime in the past. Most theories recognize that desistance is a
multifaceted process for offenders who continually engage in criminal behaviour. Many theoretical frameworks in recent criminological study have attempted to explain desistance. While there is still a debate about exactly how desistance occurs, Life course researches investigating desistance have observed five factors found to be consistent using various theoretical frameworks in criminology.

According to Devers (2011) the first observation is the relationship between age and desistance from crime, suggesting that the prevalence of offending decreases with age. The second empirical evidence is that the incidence of offending does not necessarily decrease with age for some offenders it will increase (Blumstein et al., 1988; Farrington, 1986). And finally, the third finding is that there is relative continuity within offending, thus those who commit crime as adults are also more likely to have committed crime as adolescents. In addition, the length of an offender’s criminal career is inversely related to onset, or at the age at which the first crime is committed (Farrington and Hawkins, 1991, Moffitt, 1993). The fifth empirical evidence put forward by desistance researchers is that, despite patterns of continuity in offending, there is great diversity in criminal offending because many offenders do not become career criminals (Nagin and Paternoster 2000; Robins, 1978). The last observation is that most desistance researchers agree that there are multiple pathway out of crime. According to Sampson and Laub (1993), there is also little relative agreement about how exactly marriage and stable employment affect desistance from crime. These revelations justified the need for more research in this area. Studies by Besani, et al., (2009), Blokland et al., (2005) Forrest, (2007) Laub et al., (1998) Laub and Sampson (2003) McMillin (2007) among others that examine the relationship between marriage and desistance generally find that married individuals are less likely to commit crime compared to those who are single. Support has also been found in samples of high – risk offenders Farrington and West, (1995) Honey et al., (1995) Laub and Sampson (2003). Sampson et al., (1998) tested the causal effect of marriage on offending and found that being married led to 35 percent decrease in crime.

Employment is also central to desistance theory, because having a job reinforces social conformity. Sampson and Laub (1993:141) assert that both marriage and employment transitions are “characterized by an extensive set of obligations, expectations and interdependent social network”. Like marriage, employment can create new situations with supervision and monitoring as well as new opportunities of social support and change in routine activities. According to Devers (2011), a small number of studies (Benda et al., 2005; Sampson and Laub, 2003) have found that those who are employed are more likely to desist from crime. While others have found that employment has no effect on desistance (McMillin, 2007; Neilsen, 1999; Tripodi et al 2010). Sampson and Laub's age-graded life-course theory appears to be a good and viable explanation model of how change as well as continuity occurs in the lives of some men, while Gottfredson and Hirschi’s (1990) perspective also has some support. In the light of this line of reasoning the currently study does not seek to explore how marriage or employment leads to desistance but rather investigate the causal factors likely to trigger desistance in the context of a juvenile boys correctional institution.
3 Research Methods

3.1 Study Site: Background information of the Senior Boys Correctional Centre

According to the Ghana Prisons records, the Senior Boys Correctional Centre (SBCC) formerly known as the Ghana Borstal Institute was established on 19th May 1947 by the colonial administration when the need was felt to establish a separate institution for young offenders who before this establishment were sent to the adult prisons. Formally, the place in which the SBCC is situated was a camp for the West African Frontiers Force of the then British colonial administration. It served as a base for the British West African soldier during the Second World War. When the war ended, the place was converted into the SBCC. The SBCC Institute is located at a Mamobi a suburb Accra and it is being managed by the Ghana Prison Services, thus the custodian staffs are prison personnel and are in uniform when on duty. The SBCC is the only institution in Ghana currently mandated to house young offenders between the ages of 14-19 years who are in conflict with the law (Juvenile delinquent). It has been established to avoid sending young person’s to prison. It is meant to give skills training and education to juvenile delinquents so that on discharge the skills and training they have acquired will be beneficial in their transition to adulthood reducing reoffending rates.

The SBCC is structured in a way as not to create an impression for the inmates to feel that they are living in prison. Unlike the adult prisons where security is the main concern, at the SBCC security is not the major concern hence the institution is not walled. When inmates arrive from their various destinations, they are housed in a room under constant supervision for a period of time. When the officers realize after a series of counseling sessions and observation that the juvenile will not escape, the juvenile is released without any strict supervision. A juvenile is committed to the institution by the juvenile court only after the court has received and is satisfied with reports by the police and the probation officer who in most cases is an officer from the social welfare, concerning the offenders conduct, previous crime record and circumstances leading to his offence (Abochie and Senah, 1987). The juvenile is then interviewed on his trade interest before being committed. The length of study at the institution depends on the staff assessment of the inmates’ response to training. Vocational skills being offered to the delinquents at the institutions includes auto – mechanics and electrical, general electrical, ceramics, welding and blacksmithing, shoe making, tailoring, carpentry, draughtsmanship and block- lying and educational training among others. A juvenile delinquent who is discharge from the institutions goes out with National Vocational Training Institute (NVTI) proficiency grade two certificates. Also inmates who are found to be academically good are given formal education as far as to the senior education level. The participants who were used in this study were juvenile delinquents committed to the SBCC on various offences but leading their normal lives in their communities and schools. Their narrative shared experiences portray how their interactions with their friends transformed their lives to law abiding members of society.

Data Collection and Analysis:

The research design was qualitative. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to select the participants for interview. The justification for using such sampling techniques was necessitated by the fact that there are no data base with records and adequate information on juvenile delinquents who have transitioned to adulthood. To ensure reliability and validity of the
data, the information provided by the participants were verified from the appropriate agencies. In all, a total of ten juvenile delinquents in their adulthood were tracked and interviewed. Notes were taking as they shared their experiences in a setting that allowed them to shared their lived experiences without any interruptions. The analysis and presentation of data was based on the themes emerging from their shared narratives.

**Ethical Considerations:**

The researcher addresses ethical concerns by following all ethical procedures and seeking clearance from the University of Ghana Ethical Committee for the Humanities before proceeding with the data collection. The consent of respondents was sought through the use of a written agreement which allowed them to fix their thumb print or signature. Consent details were explained to the respondents in English and in their own dialect to enable them understand fully the implications of the study as well as the scope and the type of questions they were likely to answer. The respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Codes were used instead of their original names. The researcher was sensitive to the feelings of the respondents by ensuring voluntary participation and avoiding coercion. Interviews were done in a setting which allowed the participants to share their life experiences without any interruptions.

**5 Discussion of Findings**

The findings from the narrative shared experiences of participants vary from some underlying assumptions of the differential association theory by Sutherland (1947). According to Matsueda (1988) for the last decade the trend of theoretical innovation of the differential association theory has been supplanted by two distinct trends namely, one that focuses on testing the theory, deriving hypothesis from it prepositions and subjecting those hypothesis to empirical verification and the second trend entails rejecting the theories principles in favor of social control and integrated theories. The narrative shared experiences of the three juvenile delinquents used in the context of this study illustrate how their interactions within a context of differential association, in other words similar characteristics changed their offending trajectory. The excerpt from their narrative interviews nicely summaries the variations of the data with the basic assumptions of the differential association theory. The three participants tie their change in offending trajectory with their association and their interaction with their delinquents counterparts at the SBCC.

……..Case # 6… Interviewer: How did you get to the SBCC and how old were you? 
………..Participant:…….“I was 17 years old when I went to the SBCC for defiling a 12 year old sister of my friend. ..... I spent three years at the institution …. It was a nice place because it is not like the prisons where you are locked up....you are free to walk around.….Interviewer: Tell me more about your friends at the centre, your relationship with them, the kinds of activities you usually engage in?.Participant: In fact, there are good people as well as bad people in the SBCC, some of the guys were thieves - they have not stopped their offending behavior, instead of them learning lessons from the offences they committed...... they were still stealing, smoking and keeping up with their deviant lifestyles. Some go as far as to insult officers who intend punish them, but the good friends will always tell you this place is not good so don’t strive to be here..... Most of the good friends were busily learning to write their exams in Basic Education
Certificate of Examination [BECE] … I join them and sometimes help them solve mathematics questions together…. My friends were astonished at my mathematics solving skills and they encouraged me to enroll in the mathematics classes ….. I wrote and passed my exams and thereafter furthered my education at the Accra Technical Training Centre (ATTC) ….. Interviewer: How were you influenced by these friends?…… Participant:…… “I will say my interaction with my new found friends at the SBCC impacted positively on my academic life ….. They influenced me to develop interest in education ….. by the time I was living the Institution I had a certificate in BECE ….. In fact, my association with my new friends at the institution affected me positively in the sense that it helped me to pass my BECE and that is why I am here today. … Interviewer: What are your future plans?…… Participant: I want to become a building contractor, and to do this I have to be very serious in life but what will make this dream possible will be the person to help me when I complete my education” [20 year old desister in his adulthood]

……Case 2 # Interviewer:…… How did you get to the SBCC and how old were you? ……Participant: “I was 16 year old when I went to the SBCC ….. I and my friends stole a large sum of money and six bottle of whisky belonging to one of my friends grandmother who had travelled on holidays ….. I spent three years at the centre, learnt tailoring and furthered my education, at the time of leaving the Centre, I had obtain BECE and National Vocation and training Institute (NVTI) certificates ….. I pursed further education at the ATTC and currently working with a manufacturing company in Accra……. Interviewer: Tell me more about your friends at the centre, your relationship with them, the kinds of activities you usually engage in?….. Participant: Life at the centre was a great experience in the sense that I learnt lessons which changed my offending path for a bad boy like me ….. I had a lot of friends, some were good and others were bad, some will teach you to do good things others will teach you to do worse things like smoking and learn new ways of stealing , but all my friends were good , we even formed a theater group and organized dramas during Christmas and also when visitors come around we act the plays and they give us money , in fact when I realized you are a bad friend I will not come close to you especially if I realized that you have not regretted of your offense”[23 year old desister in his adulthood].

Case # 5 …..“interviewer: How did you get to the SBCC and how old were you?…… Participant….. I was 17 years old when I went to the SBCC for stealing six hundred Ghana cedis GH¢600.00 – …. I spent three years at the centre and learnt a vocation in auto mechanics…… I had good friends as well as bad friends while at the centre. However, my main concern was the training I was receiving, some of the bad friends will tell you to accompany them to steal and smoke but I never consented to their proposals ….. I recalled a time when one of my friend asked to accompany with him one evening to steal ….. we went around a residential area around the Accra international airport ….. we saw this generator we want to steal but it was too big…. upon a second thought I said to myself , stealing money has brought me here what will happen to me when I steal this big thing ….. I may find myself in the prisons ….. I told my friend that
I will not do such a thing …..He started insulting me that I am an afraid man and too timid …. I left him there and since then I parted company with him and our paths never crossed till I left the SBCC…. [23 year old desister in his adulthood ]

The three cases illustrated above show how the participant’s interaction with their delinquent counterpart in an institutional context triggered their turning points. The critical elements leading to their desistance were the friendship factors and cognitive transformation shift. Studies by Sutherland (1947), Goirdano, et al. (1986), Abrah 2006, Antwi-Bosiako and Andoh (2010) among others have established a relationship between associations with delinquent peers and criminality. According to Matsueda (1988), Sutherland’s theory marked a watershed in criminology and it was instrumental in bringing the perspective of sociology to the forefront of criminology. Sutherland proposed nine prepositions that explain the processes through which the learning of deviant or criminal values occurs. Three of his prepositions varies from the narrative shared experiences presented in the context of this study, namely, his assertion that criminal behavior is learnt in intimate groups, and that, in intimate groups of same characteristics individual learn the techniques for committing crime as well as the appropriate motives, attitudes and rationalization for committing crime. And finally the assertion that the more intensely and more frequently people are expose to a set of values about criminality, the more likely it is that they will be influenced.

Matsueda (1988) further explain that differential association’s theory which has become one of the best explanatory models for explaining persistence in crime identifies a dynamic ongoing process of interaction that produces among other things, criminal acts. Changes in the social interaction cause individual ratios of definitions favorable and unfavorable to crime to vary over time. Thus, in highly institutionalized context as the context within which the participants found themselves, consistent patterns are presented yielding stable rations of definitions and less – structured settings, divergent patterns are presented yielded fluctuating ratios of definitions. These assumptions are relative and may differ in certain socio-cultural contexts, a much larger sample size may be needed to verify. On the basis of these findings, it can be concluded that;

- in the same way as certain group of individuals learn criminal behaviour in intimate groups favorable to the violation of social norms, within the same intimate groups others may learn conventional values leading to desistance as indicated in the lived experiences of the participants
- in the same way as individuals learn the techniques for committing crime as well as the appropriate motives, attitudes and rationalization for committing crime in intimate groups. Within the same intimate groups social interaction with delinquents may provide opportunities for some group of offenders to learn the appropriate motives, attitudes and rationalization for desisting from crime.
- Contrary to the expectation of Sutherland (1947), the longer, earlier, more intense and frequently partipicants were exposed to a set of values about criminality the more likely they change their deviant pathways or offending trajectory.
6 Conclusions

In conclusion, this paper does not intend to underscore the relevance of Sutherland’s (1947) differential association theory as an explanatory model for understanding criminal behaviors but rather propose an empirical verification of the theory in different socio-cultural context. The study contributes to criminological literature on crime and desistance by emphasizing the role of friendship in tandem with marriage and employment as factors likely to change offending trajectories. The findings further suggest that correctional experience should not always be viewed as a detrimental factor reinforcing crime, but rather be seen as an opportunity which may trigger tuning points. Contrary to the expectation of Sutherland, differential associations may not always create the condition or an atmosphere for learning of deviant values but rather may provide opportunities for learning of conventional values, motives and attitudes for desisting from crime.

REFERENCES


