

January 2015

# Intimate Partners in Crime: Utilizing Life Course to Examine Female Criminality

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By

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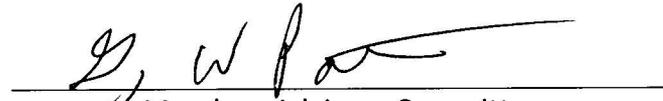
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Intimate Partners in Crime: Utilizing Life-Course to Examine Female Criminality

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Master of Science  
Eastern Kentucky University  
Richmond, Kentucky  
2015

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
Eastern Kentucky University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
MASTER OF SCIENCE  
May, 2015

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents  
Cheryl Morris and Larry Hayden for all of their support.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis chair, Dr. Kishonna Gray, for her guidance and patience. I would also like to thank the other committee members, Dr. Kristie Blevins and Dr. Gary Potter, for their comments and assistance over the past two years. I would like to express my thanks to my undergraduate mentor, Dr. Ryan Baker, for his faith in me and giving me the push I needed to further my education into the graduate program. I would like to thank my parents Cheryl Morris and Larry Hayden, and my sister Melanie Hayden for always believing in me.

## ABSTRACT

Employing a life-course framework, this research examines how various relationship typologies expands Sampson and Laub's (2003) discussion of 'marriage' as a crucial mechanism involved in desistance. Moreover, recent contributions to life-course theory has identified a void in the literature in regards to how 'turning points' operate within female offenders. As such, this research fills those gaps by re-conceptualizing relationship typologies and focusing on the similarities between marriage and relationships. Two research questions are explored: If marriage is a turning point for crime, do non-marital relationships have a similar effect? If so, do different qualities and typologies of relationship status provoke similar mechanisms found within marriage? And second, if relationships status does have an effect in desisting from crime, how does the stability of the relationship vary in the likelihood of desistance? Through a mixed methods approach, a semi-structured interview and survey was administered to female detainees (n=27) at a medium-sized local jail/detention center. Results indicated that relationship typologies serve as a durable indicator to the onset and the desistance of criminal activity. Likewise, the results indicated a positive relationship between criminality and delinquent male counter-parts when defined as a significant other. Furthermore, female inmate's cohabitation with a delinquent significant other was associated with poor relationship 'stability' and with illicit substance abuse lifestyles. Additional areas of concern surfaced, suggesting a need for further investigation for the interaction effects for illicit drug use, children, and history of abuse as factors that can both provoke and insulate female criminality.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Female criminality continues to be a neglected field in research. Traditional 'add women and stir' approaches assume a similar path to criminality as males without ever divulging into what compels women into crime and criminal activities. The lack of scientific attention could be attributed to the small number of women who come into contact with law enforcement compared to men. However, differences in female reality (i.e., harsher sentences, increased penalties, burden of motherhood, etc.) beg for a deeper understanding of female onset to crime. Additionally, there is little consensus or agreement on factors influencing female criminality. To gain a better sense of factors that contribute to female criminality, a life-course analysis must be employed.

Life-Course criminology often implements a longitudinal analysis and, as such, is used to extend developmental theories when exploring trends or cause/effect issues linked to criminality. Originally developed by Sampson and Laub (1993) life-course is a recent and very robust theory, however, researchers have limited its use by concentrating on specific sample populations. That is, Sampson and Laub (1993/2003) extended the Gluecks (1950) data and, as a result, restricted their life-course analysis to explaining male criminality. More recently, some attempts to apply a life-course perspective to female criminality has surfaced, however the constructs of Life-Course Theory remain male specific. This adds another layer to its limitations when attempting to use male-based theories to explain female criminality.

Sampson and Laub (1993) developed this theory by working on a follow up study to the Glueck's (1950) *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency* data. The Glueck data were used by many researchers to explain developmental pathways and trajectories into crime. It was the first longitudinal study to look at crime overtime. Sampson and Laub's (2003) research in *Shared Beginnings and Divergent Lives* improved on their previous analysis by using statistical techniques, longitudinal analysis, qualitative interviews, and a multidimensional approach to the data providing a framework for life-course theory; constructing a better explanation of individual life history through participant narratives. Sampson and Laub (2003) specifically point to informal social controls and interpersonal bonds such as employment, marriage, and military service surfaced as the most important "turning points" in determining desistance.

One of the main limitations of Life-Course study is limited by its sample population, which excludes females. Females are the forgotten population within the criminal justice system (Fletcher et al., 1993). They have been neglected as a criminal population and in both cohort and longitudinal development studies for the last half-century.

The research presented here will adopt this multidimensional approach and specifically utilize life history narratives to investigate bonds, turning points (i.e., marriage), and role and equality of relationships in reducing criminal behavior. The proposed research will begin to narrow these turning points and in doing so, pay special attention to the concept of marriage, and provide a deeper investigation by constructing, measuring, and coding relationship 'typologies' when marriage is absent.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### *Life-Course Theory History*

Elder (1978) first coined life course using concepts of human agency and social change to shift research agendas from early socialization patterns to the entire life-span. Elder (1994) therefore provides the guiding definition that allows timing, sequence, and duration for criminogenic events. Life-Course Theory by definition is “the interweave of age-graded trajectories, such as work careers and family pathways, that are subject to changing conditions and future options, and to short-term transitions ranging from leaving school to retirement,” life-course helps understand the initiation, continuation, and termination of offending across the life-span (Elder, 1994, p. 5). The idea of life-course is broken down into three concepts. First, the idea of life-course being a trajectory or pathway that is followed which is further broken down into an entrance dimension, success dimension, and the timing in which it has occurred. In sum, there are good transitions throughout the life-course, but it is all specific to recognizing that not everyone enters certain trajectories, as well as recognizing that some people do have successful marriages and jobs while others do not. Further, the timing of all of these trajectories through life is what is most significant. The second idea is the transition between the life events that are embodied in the life-course (i.e., first job, first crime committed). The last concept includes the idea that turning points lead to abrupt or

gradual changes in the development of the individual's life-course (Elder, 1994). Some turning points can lead to radical turnarounds or changes within the life-course.

To further explain the three steps of life-course, the first step is an initiation into this criminal pathway or trajectory which can be categorized in four different dimensions. The dimensions consist of the initial participation of crime to the frequency of which criminal activity is committed, the seriousness of the act, and eventually what leads to determine how long the career length of crime is as well as what initiates the desistance. Life-Course Theory attempts to explain why individuals turn towards crime in adolescence, how and why they persist through adulthood and hypothesize factors on desistance. Sampson and Laub's (2003) Life-Course theory comes from a multitude of combining other developmental theories. To understand criminal careers they had to research Moffit's (1993) dual taxonomy approach on how there are two different types of offenders: 1) the adolescent limited offender, whose criminality is associated with peer pressure and desists shortly after adolescence and 2) the life-course persistent offenders whom have antisocial activity with origins the interactions between neuropsychological deficits, poverty, and disadvantaged environments (Moffit 1993). According to Sampson and Laub (2003), most crimes peak during adolescence (age crime curve 16-18) and decline shortly after, but the life-course persistent criminals have an early onset of crime and their criminality stays stable throughout their entire life course.

The life-course perspective can be defined by "pathways through the age differentiated life-span" as well as "age differentiation is manifested in expectations and

options that impinge on decision process and the course of events that give shape to the life-stages, transitions, and turning points” which also includes “the sequence of culturally defined age-graded roles and social transitions that are enacted over time” (Caspi, Elder, and Herbener, 1990, p 15). The trajectories are pathways throughout the life-span such as work, marriage, parenthood, self-esteem and criminal behavior. The trajectories are characterized through duration, timing and the specific ordering of the major life events which are developed into turning points. Turning points change the trajectory and redirect the life-path such as social institutions, school, work, military, marriage, and parenthood.

Stability of crime and desistance, as well as antisocial behavior over time, can also be defined as homotypic continuity. Often time’s antisocial behavior during childhood manifests itself into adulthood. A broad example, a child who throws temper tantrums can lead to lack of education due to dropping out, which also leads to adult problems of job instability and low income.

#### *Research and Data*

Sampson and Laub’s (2003) Life-Course research stemmed off of the Glueck and Glueck (1950) data of 500 delinquent and 500 non-delinquent boys. The initial study matched age, IQ, SES and ethnicity of subjects between the ages of 14 to 32. The Glueck’s measured job stability at the ages of 17, 25, and 32 between incarceration and crime. Findings include individuals with low self-esteem and tendencies towards crime are the same individuals whom are likely to have an unstable employment, as well have history of heavy abusive drinkers. They also found that the stronger social ties are, the

less likely the individuals are to commit crime and participate in delinquency. Childhood delinquency can ruin adulthood by closing the doors for opportunities, considering most employers will not hire if they have an arrest record. This finding can be explained by labeling theory and primary and secondary deviance. Primary deviance is the initiation act of first crime, and secondary deviance is continuing on with criminal activity which will forever label the individuals as delinquent.

### *Turning Points*

Sampson and Laub (1993) address several turning points to explain persistence and desistance throughout the life-course. The turning points include marriage and spouses, military, reform school, and employment. For Sampson and Laub (2003), turning points aid in a “knifing off” effect from the immediate environment (p. 145). The idea of turning points are explained by the individual’s normal routine, certain changes that can either aid or desist from delinquency. According to Sampson and Laub (2003), pathways towards continuity in crime and conformity are modified by social controls throughout the transition into adulthood. These key institutions of social controls are the turning points (i.e., marriage, military and employment). Even though marriage is not exactly a social control, close personal ties are, and the mutual investment increase the social bond between individuals can be defined through marriage. Sampson and Laub (2003) believe that these social bonds and turning points should lead to a reduction in delinquent and criminal behavior. They posit turning points can redirect the delinquent path; they are also described as “turnarounds” or changes in the life history, which can ultimately separate a delinquents past towards a non-delinquent future.

Turnabouts are also described through a long period of time, throughout the life-course and not a dramatic one-time event. To further examine turning points, there needs to be a full knowledge of informal social controls which are embedded into turning points. Changes in adult crime were mainly from job stability, and marital attachments. Sampson and Laub (2003) found that the stronger the ties to work and family, deviance decreased among the delinquents. In the role of cohabitation, marriage can also serve as a negative turning point. According to Kandel et al. (1990) deviant individuals tend to select deviant marriage or cohabitation partners which can increase deviant behavior.

Social ties, such as marriage as turning points, can inhibit adults from committing crime, from the accumulation of social capita obtained from employment, and their involvement in their family lies. At this point, Sampson and Laub (2003) found that the individual would have something, if not a lot to lose if they involved themselves in delinquent activity. Sampson and Laub (2003), in addition to Hirschi (1962), found that weak social controls are one of the main causes for onset, and continuation of delinquency.

Turning Points can be viewed as a positive outlook on a delinquent life, but they can also be viewed as negative. Clausen (1990) stated that the positive turning points were linked in marriage, meaningful work, and military. Turning Points can also be construed in a negative manor. Negative turning points can consist of prolonged incarceration, heavy drinking, and job instability within the transition to adulthood. Other negative turning points can also be marriage, consisting of a marriage to another

delinquent partner, making an absolute delinquent cohabitation, which may prove hard to get away from.

In addition to turning points, a vital part of the life-course theory perspective is that of human agency. According to Matza (1964) human agency is the purposeful execution of choice and individual will in the process of desisting from crime. In the transition between childhood and adulthood, an individual can have a new sense of self, and personally chooses to desist from crime, often comes when they are a family man, or provider. Human agency, which derives from rational choice theory, can also help explain persistence in delinquent acts. Some men merely decide, and insist on continuing on a life-style of criminality, not from impulsiveness, or lack of knowledge about crime, but mainly because they enjoy the rewards of crime. Criminal activity from outsiders are often viewed as exciting, new, attractive, and seductive, which is what initially can draw individuals into criminality. Many men, whom actually desisted from crime, are the ones who used human agency, and accepted responsibility for the crimes they commit, and freely admitted their crimes. According to Brame, Paternoster and Bushway (2004), in the rational choice perspective, agency is a matter of preferences. These preferences can be used to change events such as marriage and employment. Essentially, humans make their own choices to participate in crime or not, but this is one section where life-course criminology does not exactly elaborate on within their turning points. Although, according to Elder (1994), human agency is a key principle in the life-course perspective, describing that individuals are going to make their own decisions about their life-course.

## *Marriage*

Marriage as a turning point is further discussed in *Trajectory of Change in Criminal Offending: Good Marriages and the Desistance Process*. Sampson and Laub (1993) found that desistance from crime is facilitated with quality of marital bond, and that the influence was gradual and cumulative over time. Also, individuals who desist from crime entered into stable marriages and stable employment (turning points). The trajectories are not for the act itself, but the attachments that go along with it.

Sampson and Laub (2003) did a follow up study using the Glueck's data. Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck (1950) did a 25 year study on delinquent boys from the ages of 14, 25, and 32. The Glueck's interviewed the subjects, as well as their families, social workers, school teachers, neighbors, employers, and criminal justice officials. Using different measures to study individual differences, family differences and adolescent behavior, adult behavior was also measured through the age of 32. Adult bonds were measured by job stability, attachment to spouse, marital status at age 32 and if it was a "shotgun" marriage, or because of child. The findings argue early "good marriages" will desist from criminality sooner with a gradual decline close to zero. Good marriages were also studied and the magnitude of preventative marital bonding grows. Sampson and Laub found "the good marriage effect", resulting in a 75 percent decline in criminality compared to those in not good marriages, while bad marriages tend to hasten crime. Sampson and Laub found "distinctive trajectories of individual offending that diverge markedly from aggregate age crime curve" as well as "childhood juvenile characteristics are insufficient from predicting patterns of the future offending in a high-

rate group of juvenile offenders". There was also the issue of timing and quality of marriages, meaning "early marriages characterized by social cohesiveness led to growing preventative affect, and that good marriage is growing and takes time to show effect" (Sampson & Laub, 1998, page 237).

Sampson and Laub (1993) first discussed marriage as a turning point and a contributing life event that associated with crime desistance. Since their work, life-course research has identified that marriage does indeed act as a turning point. However, contemporary areas of research, similar to Sampson and Laub's (1993) reanalysis of Glueck and Glueck (1950), focus on the effects of marriage for male criminality alone. As such, there is a void within life course analyses dedicated to the discussion of marriage and its effect for female criminality and the role it plays in desistance. Furthermore, while marriage seems to be a valid turning point, the role of "relationship status" prior to arrest remains unexplored.

### **Female Offending**

Female criminality and the void in criminal justice theory given to the female offender cannot be ignored. Female offending is rapidly rising and has been for the last several decades<sup>1</sup>. The United States currently incarcerates more than 2.4 million individuals, and more than 205,000 of them are females (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2012). This recent observation began in the 1960s and 1970s during the rise of feminism in politics and the women's movement, prior to the social changes that drove these

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<sup>1</sup> The rate of female incarceration (4.8) has increased at nearly twice the rate of male incarceration (2.8) (*Women in Prison*, ACLU, 2012). Kentucky female incarceration has increased at 14%, placing Kentucky in the top 3 fastest growing. (BJS, 2012)

observations, generally women were either not participating in crime and if they did not commit crime it was (considered) a rare occurrence. As result, the justice system viewed female offenders simply as acting like a male or demonstrating masculine characteristics, or that female criminals simply had psychological damage.

Recent criminological research clearly demonstrates that women are increasingly committing crime at a higher frequency. As mention earlier, female criminality has been rising for both UCR index categories (i.e., violent and property offenses). For example, when Goodkind et al. (2009) explored if female delinquency is actually rising, their research clearly indicated that female criminality is becoming more frequent, especially for violent crimes. Furthermore, Steffensmeier (1996) has noted similar increases for female criminality in regards to property offenses and minor crimes.

#### *A Social Reaction to Female Criminality?*

According to Meda Chesney-Lind (1998) in an article *The Forgotten Offender*, women have always been looked over; as criminals and within the criminal justice system. Chesney-Lind quickly pointed out that the female crime rate almost doubled the rate of increase comparable to males and in fact might be moving at a faster pace than males. They note, the “rate of increase in female incarceration in local jails 1985 has been 9.9 percent for women, compared to 6.4 percent for men” (p. 67). This finding suggests that women are actually offending more frequently or, as the authors argue, females might have finally gotten noticed? This is a valid question. For example, the authors continue on to note that initially female inmates were housed anywhere that

they could find a place. This was before the growth and privatization of corrections was forced by the government to build more prisons specifically for women. According to Rafter (1992) in *Partial Justice: Women, Prisons, and Social Control*, during the 1980s more than 34 prisons were opened specifically to house females.

The recent rise in female criminality has forced criminologists to question, “are girls really becoming more delinquent?” Several researchers have attempted to answer this difficult question. Examining if the rise in female criminality is a real statistical increase or if it’s simply a change in the social reaction of the criminal justice reaction (i.e., change in tough on crime approaches or possibly arresting the females more frequently for crimes they have always committed). Goodkind et al. (2009) in *Are Girls Really Becoming More Delinquent than Boys* attempted to investigate if girls really have become more delinquent than boys over the past 20 years. They note, historically, girls have always been less delinquent than boys. Focusing on variables such as race, ethnicity, age, and sex, overall, their research suggested a change in the way the criminal justice system has reacted to female criminality. Goodkind et al. (2009) focused on females and questioned if they are progressively becoming more violent or is society starting to label minor offenses as violent when previously they were not? They also questioned “gender convergence”, which argues that girls are now socialized more like boys and this masculine socialization may explain the increase in female violence. The research ultimately yielded not support for gender convergence, so they suggested that the rise in female criminality might be a result of the criminal justice system becoming more sensitive to female violence.

According to Lanier and Henery (2010), the recent focus on female criminality may be a product of the criminal justice institution. Noting that “feminist scholars believe that traditional mainstream criminology is unable to explain these patterns of behavior because it ignores the structuring of society by gender that results in patriarchy and its theories are almost exclusively designed and applicable to explain male crime, which is known as the “generalizability problem” (p. 324). Lanier and Henery (2010) also address the “gender-ratio problem,” discussing why women are less likely to engage in crime and delinquency. This gender-ratio problem uses a power-believe perspective to “introduce an innovative perspective on female criminality... and asserts that criminality can be best understood within the context of oppression in patriarchal societies” (p. 166). In essence, women are oppressed through inequality and are often denied access to economics, education, and politics, legal and religious sanctions.

Researchers suggest that female crime is likely a product from the women’s liberation movement, further supporting the idea that rapid social change can affect criminality. That is, females were becoming more independent with more male opportunities and therefore were more likely to be involved in criminal activity and arrested. Finally, Steffensmeier and Allan (1996) focus on female desistance from crime, finding that relationships, marriage, and children significantly reduce female criminal behavior.

### *Life-Course Theory and Female Offending*

Recently, the life-course perspective on female offending has become more popular within criminological research. However, this research is limited and females are still considered “the forgotten population” within the crime and justice system (Chesney-Lind, 1985, Fetcher et al. 1993). Recent research has married gender based theory and life-course theory to explain criminality from a feminist perspective.

The age crime distribution is now narrowing between males and females (Gove, 1985). However, even though the age crime curve is now relative, the rate at which female criminality is increasing suggests that females are committing crimes at a higher frequency than males. This raises the question, if criminological research has focused on curbing male criminality, is it possible that the interventions understood and used are male-specific? For example, most research shows that the process of desistence for males is attachment to social bonds; would this be the same for females? Sampson and Laub (1993), in *Understanding Desistence from Crime*, found that females desist during the transition into adulthood after leaving school, leaving home, forming partnerships and often taking a sharper decline after having children. While, the same research suggests that male desistence was linked to ‘lost contact’ with deviant peers. Graham and Bowling (1995) interviewed delinquent females, “‘among most males and females who are equally closely supervised at home and at school, who are equally attached to their school and their family and who have no delinquent peers, offending remains about twice as common among males as females’ (1995:48, p.53).

More recent trends in research are on the idea of a gendered crime to find the real reason behind the differences between male and female offending, and to help build on this already existing but limited theory of females, and gender. According to Steffensmeier and Allen (1996), the majority of crimes committed by women were property offenses and minor crimes instead of serious crimes. The majority of crimes women commit in 1990s were DUI, larceny-theft, and “other except traffic” offenses. The other category was mainly public disorder and local ordinance violations. A significant finding from the research was that children were a big indicator that women wanted to better themselves to protect their children. Relationships in this sense can go both ways, they can make females continue crime if they are in a delinquent relationship or parent-child relationships can make them want to stop.

*Life Course Theory: Marriage as a Turning Point*

Informal controls, specifically family and friends, tend to be the strongest predictors for reducing female criminality. For example, data from the first wave of the National Youth Survey found that female criminality dramatically changed with age and peer association (Warr 1993). The link between age and crime decreased rapidly when peer associations were controlled (p. 35). In this research, marriage was found to be a desisting factor from crime because it diminishes old ties from delinquent peers. The reason being, marriage changes routine activities, as well as maturation, especially any spare time is committed towards your family, less time being delinquent. Marriage has been shown as one of the strongest predictors for life-course theorists.

While much of life-course literature has been studied within the United States, some international research is beginning to investigate different populations. Similar findings regarding the importance of relationships were found in Dutch women. Bersani, Laub, Nieuwbeerta (2008) found a link between gender and marriage, where the women who were not married were more likely to engage in criminal pathways. Bersani et al. (2008) discussed “marrying down” or “marrying up”, which means if you marry up, you are committing into a relationship with a non-delinquent partner, but if you marry down you are entering into a criminal relationship. Bersani et al. (2008) suggested that unstable marriages will lead to increased female criminality. They found the opposite to be true, where healthy committed marriages resulted in lower female criminal behavior. One other area to note is that the research remained the role of children as a possible, supplemental, turning point. With this in mind, the current research will also investigate the role of children among female criminals and their decisions to offend.

In 1998, Baskin and Somers interviewed 170 women who committed a variety of violent crimes in New York City Area. They focused on the desistance from violent crimes. Desistance was defined as no criminal involvement within two years prior to the interviews. Several of the factors found as causes of desistance were pains of imprisonment, criminal justice sanctions, isolation from family and friends, and the physical and mental “wear and tear” of the criminal offending life-style. Desistance was explained through a three step process. First, the stage of commitment, which is “forming a commitment to change”. This step is often brought about by a shock or crisis from criminal behavior (Baskin & Sommers 1998, p. 141, fig. 6.1). The Second Stage of

desistence is discontinuance. During this stage, there is often a public announcement or a promise that the offender is going to change their ways (Shover 1996). Desistence also involves a separation of the person of places where criminal activities were taking place. The third and final step of desistence is maintenance of the decision to stop (Baskin & Somers, 1998, p. 136). Desistence stems from a psychological, development, and sociological factors.

*Life Course Theory: Can Relationships be a Turning Point?*

The investigation of relationship status, as well as, applying life-course theories to the female population is a rather new area in criminology. Goodkind et al. (2009) examined if female delinquency is actually rising. The results indicated that female criminality is becoming more frequent, especially for violent crimes. Chesney-Lind et al. (2004) have linked the recent increase to bonding, or lack thereof, between parents and female criminals.

Other areas of research linking female criminality and life-course have focused on female incarceration (Benda, 2005). According to Benda (2005) the recidivism rate between men and women could be explained by partner satisfaction, friendships, and employment; sparking a question of quality, stability and therefore a 'typology' measure. Interpersonal attributes examined levels of stress, aggression, suicidal thoughts among incarcerated females (Benda, 2005). Results stated that the effects of recidivism rates are more positively affected for women more so than men. Another finding is that relationships were found to deter criminal behavior at a greater rate for females than males. According to the researchers, one possible explanation was that

women in a relationship with a significant other, who is also criminal, will learn criminality. The findings from Benda's (2005) research guide the proposed research, that is, it concerns for a closer look at relationships; specifically quality, status and types of relationship among female offenders.

The literature above provides insight into how female criminality is still largely neglected in life course research. Moreover, where research has explored the role of gender by the use of a life-course lens, processual differences remain unclear (i.e., life-course markers such as onset, persistence and desistence). This research hypothesizes that female criminality varies in onset, persistence, and desistence differently than male counterparts. These distinctions prompt the area of inquiry and two central research questions,

RQ1: If marriage is a turning point for crime, do non-marital relationships have a similar effect? If so, do different qualities and typologies of relationship status provoke similar mechanisms found within marriage?

RQ2: If relationships status does have an effect in desisting from crime, how does the stability of the relationship vary in the likelihood of desistence?

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### *Research Design*

In order to address the research questions, archival data and official sources were used alongside a questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed to gain both quantitative and qualitative data, similar to previous studies of incarcerated women (Benda, 2005; Bosner and Somners, 1998; Steffenmeir, 1996; Simmons, 1995). The questionnaire consisted of 60 open and close-end questions, and was broken down into three areas: demographics, criminal history, and personal history. The administration of the questionnaire was a semi-structured interview style. The interviews were administered only by the primary investigator, which eliminated the need to train other investigators and also reduced any problems related to inter-coder reliability. It should be noted that the primary investigator also administered in an interview style to make sure that the participants understood the material. Considering that inmates are considered 'special populations,' each inmate was provided a full-disclosure, discussion of anonymity, and was assured that participation was purely voluntary.<sup>2</sup>

Participants' rights and welfare were protected by having the interviewees sign a release statement allowing us to interview them regarding life history and they were also informed that the information is confidential. Female prisoner's names were kept private, and code numbers were used to identify the respondents. The numbers were

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<sup>2</sup> This research was previously granted permission by the IRB board at KWC (6/15/2012).

stored on code sheets, which were is only accessible to the investigators. Participation was strictly voluntary and participants had the right to decline or drop out of the study at any time. Their welfare and rights were being protected considering the research is conducted in a controlled area at the jail, with their own safety guidelines and procedures.

The investigator worked with jail administration to gain volunteers for the study. The administrative staff met with the incarcerated female participants, explained the purpose of the study and research, and solicited volunteers. As such, this research reflected a convenience sample.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Sample***

#### *City Demographics*

This study was conducted at a minimum security jail in a small city in the Southeast. The population is 57,361 in this small city. Demographics for the city are a median age of 38 years old and a male to female ratio of 0.9:1. Within this small city 96 percent of individuals are English speaking and 87.94 percent are Caucasian, 7.46 percent and African American. The state as a whole consist of 88 percent Caucasian Americans. The minimum security jail in itself was a small jail with an average population of 500 inmates with only on average 80 to 100 of them were females.

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<sup>3</sup> Procedures for the selection of subjects within the prison will be fair to all prisoners and immune from arbitrary intervention by prison authorities or prisoners; and in some cases, control subjects may be selected randomly from the group of available prisoners who meet the characteristics needed for that particular research project *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services HHS (45 CFR 46.305(c) section 3)*

## *Questionnaire*

The questionnaire consisted of 60 questions which included: demographic information, life history, and questions relevant to the above research questions, specifically in regards to quality and type of relationship prior to incarceration. Supplemental questions also investigated SES, drug use, children, and abuse (*Appendix I*). The researcher administered the survey questions and marked and checked the boxes of the survey. This procedure not only saved time and ruled out confusion regarding questions among the participants, but also allowed the researcher to question subjects in more detail and provide further qualitative data to be obtained. Each interview lasted approximately 30-40 minutes. There were specifically 27 female detainees that were interviewed with the sample. Detainees varied in severity of offense, detention or incarcerated, and length of time incarcerated.

Life-course debates highlight marriage as a powerful turning point. However, Sampson and Laub (1998) caution that marriage only acts as a significant turning point dependent on the 'quality' of the marriage (p. 225-238)<sup>4</sup>. As such, this research explores relationship typologies through interviews of currently incarcerated female offenders. First, for descriptive purposes, the research explores traditional criminogenic variables which correlate and explain female criminality (i.e., substance abuse, physical/mental abuse, onset of first crime, employment, and previous criminal history). Similar in the

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<sup>4</sup> Sampson and Laub found in Crime and the Making: Pathways and Turning Points (2003) that turning points are dependent on the "quality" social relationships. As such, and important to this research, it should be noted that low "quality" social relationships can be defined alongside traditional predictors (i.e. abuse, substance abuse, and early onset).

way 'quality' is key for marriage to act as a turning point, the typologies above considers the 'quality' of relationships and therefore addresses RQ1. In order to address RQ2, these typologies are constructed through questions that are designed to measure relationship stability, perceptions of stability, and relationship with a criminal significant others. For example, "How long have you been in your most recent relationship?" with a multiple choice of, "less than a month, a few months, less than a year, 1-3 years, and more than 4 years." Other questions include stability of relationship such as, "overall and in general, how would you characterize your most recent relationships?" with a multiple choice of, "stable, or unstable". Assessing the role of a 'criminal significant other' was a dichotomous variable answered as yes or no, where 1 equaled 'yes.' Criminal SO (significant other) is an important variable to address RQ1 and RQ2. A relationship with a criminal SO can assist in understanding 'stability' and therefore quality and it can also give details towards female initiation and persistence with criminal behavior.

In combination, these two research questions allow the researcher to construct typologies similar to Sampson and Laub's (2003) discussion of quality marriage. That is, onset and persistence of female criminality may be linked to "negative turning points" where low-quality relationships/marriages in combination with criminal SO's can explain why female criminality is shifting, escalating and/or intensifying.

### **Participants**

The sample was comprised of currently incarcerated women (n=27) at the county detention center. Volunteers were solicited and recorded on a master list. Each

inmate was assigned a number to protect identities. Numbers and names were recorded on a master list and kept in the primary researcher's advisors office during the entire research. The code sheet was referenced from time to time to link demographics and criminal history with the narratives of each sample.

There was a mixed approach of a non-probability sampling which included both convenience and snowball sampling techniques. The sample was a purposive due to the inmates being selected were only females, and the sample was a snowball technique in that the major asked for volunteers and those volunteers directed the major to other female inmates that wanted to participate. Interviews and questionnaires consisted of a sample of twenty-seven (n=27) women. This sample size was justified considering the amount of qualitative data collected by one primary investigator using in person interviews. In preparation and to foresee any issues with the instruments reliability, a trial run was conducted with two female offenders on the first day. Due to problems within the questionnaire and with the administration of the questionnaire, I immediately stopped the interviews and went back to re-construct my questionnaires and redesign my interview style.

### **Mixed Method Approach**

This mixed method study occurred in two phases. In Phase One, the "researcher utilized qualitative research methodology through individual semi-structured interviews. This phase was undertaken to gain a sense of the lived experiences of the female inmates and was also used to create the survey instrument. In order to identify the components for the survey, individual interviews were

conducted to collect information and study those experiences of women's lives entrée to criminal activity. In Phase Two of the study, the dimensions that emerged during the discovery phase were then incorporated into a survey instrument and administered to a wider population of women within the jail. Through survey analysis, the research extended life-course to consider the effects of recent interpersonal relationships among women. It was hypothesized that the role of drug use and effects of children will also contribute to the persisting and desisting factors related to female criminality. In addition to the research questions, the research used the literature above to analyze specific areas that they believed to be important variables when understanding female criminality, specifically: the role of children, substance abuse, violence, and relationships with a criminal significant other.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS/ANALYSIS

#### *Quantitative Findings*

Average age of the inmates was 35 years of age ranging from 18 years of age to the oldest at 63 years of age. The race breakdown of the sample size was 25 self-reported as white, and 2 self-reported as black. The average current incarceration time for these women were 5.2 months, and average sentence time 4.69 years. The sample also indicated rank or seriousness of offense; 24 participants were housed with a misdemeanor charge and 3 were housed with a felony charge.

The majority of the female inmates were in a relationship where the SO was also actively criminal (88%) where only 11 percent SO had no criminal history. Nearly half (45%) indicated that their SO was responsible for introducing them to crime and/or a criminal lifestyle; and nearly a third (30%) indicated that their SO introduced them to illicit drug use. Furthermore, more than half (60%) indicated that they were actively engaged in criminal activity alongside and with their SO before arrest. In regards to addressing the RQ1, the link between relationship stability and criminality became clear. However, for RQ2, perceived stability differed greatly than for the constructed typologies which indicated stability/quality. Three questions were combined to determine if the female inmates were in a stable relationship: history of abuse, arguments or fights with SO, and breakups/separation from SO. The relationship status breakdown of the women were; 5 women are married, 11 are in a relationship, and 11

are not in a relationship at all. An interesting finding is when asked how many had a criminal SO, 24 women stated yes they were with a criminal SO, and only 3 were not. Just slightly more than half of the sample of women perceived themselves as currently engaged in a stable relationship (55%) while (44%) perceived their relationships as unstable. In order to construct typologies to assist in measuring stability (i.e., quality) female offenders were asked a variety of questions. Abuse was broken down into 5 categories, physical abuse, sexual abuse, verbal abuse, a combination of all three, or no abuse. The findings include 40.7 percent who stated there was no abuse within their relationship, 11.1 percent recorded only physical abuse, and 48.1 percent recorded a combination of all three. For frequency of arguments between female and their SO, 27 percent said they argued daily, 15 percent weekly, 18 percent once a month, seven percent never, and 22 percent said rarely. For, breakups/separations in relationship with SO, results were 44 percent never, 37 percent once or twice, and 18 percent often. Another question, while not an indicator for constructing a stability typology but may lend to a measure of stability, provided information regarding how often their SO visited them during incarceration, only 26 percent reported that their SO visited them 'weekly' and 70 percent indicated 'never.'

Through the quantitative analysis the responses indicated that relationship with a criminal SO interacted with SES and abuse. Results indicated that 16 out of 27 of the women commit crime with their significant other, more than half of the women (n=14) reported that they actively committed crime with their significant other were in the

middle socioeconomic status and nearly half (n=12) of the women in the middle class status were abused by their significant other.

## **Qualitative Analysis**

### *Relationship Narratives*

Similar to Sampson and Laub (1993), with their study on delinquent boys, they looked at marriage being a positive turning point for men, within the current research, these women are speculating that their relationship and marriage with their significant other was a negative turning point in their lives, and often the reason why they ended up in jail to begin with. Within the narratives of these women offenders you can begin to see where their relationship status was forming and therefore could be discussed as a 'negative turning point.'

All participants' names have been changed for the protection of anonymity. In the narratives from Catherine during the interviews her relationship stability coincides with the idea that relationships/marriage are negative turning points for women. Her story of criminality with her significant other began with her living with her significant other. She stated they were in a very unstable relationship and commit crimes together frequently. Her significant other was very abuse (i.e., physically, sexually, and verbally) and they commit crimes often with substance abuse, and under the influence. They were both chronic drug offenders, with methamphetamines and pain killers (opiates) and she was under the influence at the time of her arrest. She also stated she had issues

keeping a stable job because of her substance abuse problems. Catherine was sentenced with 5 years.

In another instance, the interviewee Hannah also stated she had issues within her relationship. Before being arrested on charges of possession and trafficking of controlled substance, she was married at the age of 21 and cohabitated with her significant other. They had an abusive relationship, he often physically and verbally abused her, and they had arguments weekly. After the argument she said they would often participate in substance use together. He introduced her to substance use, she even stated in the interview that "I would not be in jail if I hadn't of met my significant other". Her significant other was arrested and currently incarcerated, but she believed they had a stable relationship. They were in a relationship for 12 years. Hannah is now incarcerated with a four year sentence.

The next instance is the narrative of Tory, her significant other was the sole reason how she ended up into criminality and ultimately jail. Tory is currently married to her significant other, whom has also been arrested before. She believes that they were in a stable relationship even though they broke up often and commit crime together often. He physically and verbally abused her, and they argued daily. Her significant other never visit her while she was incarcerated either. Tory was introduced to substance use by her significant other and also stated "If I didn't have my SO I would not be in jail". She was a social drug user of methamphetamine, but sober at the time she commit the crime. Tory did say that she commit the crimes of facilitation to manufacture methamphetamine to make her significant other happy. She was sentenced to 10 years.

Samantha had a similar life-history with issues in her marriage/relationship. Samantha whom was arrested for manufacturing methamphetamines lived with her significant other, but is now divorced, they were together for 8 years. Her significant other has been arrested and incarcerated currently. Samantha stated that they did commit crime together, as well as there was abuse within her relationship. Her significant other abused her physically and verbally, as well as arguments daily, and violence towards each other after those arguments. He never visit her while she was in jail. Samantha stated that her significant other increased opportunities of crime for her, and she also stated that "if I did not have my significant other, I would not be in jail. They had chronic drug use with methamphetamine, and she was high at the time of her arrest, she was sentenced to 5 years.

#### Substance Use

As indicated in the statistics, substance abuse was significantly correlated with female criminality, and seems to be exaggerated when a criminal significant other is also a substance abuser. Substance abuse was a serious problem within these women, if they were not specifically incarcerated for substance abuse, they had abused drugs or alcohol at some point during their criminal behavior. Findings include that 55 percent of the women had a chronic drug problem; (30%) socially used drugs with friends, only 11 percent had a chronic alcohol problem and three percent used both drugs and alcohol. The two most common drugs used within these women were opiate pain killers (48%) and methamphetamine (22%). Substance abuse affected 77 percent of these women during the time of their crime and arrest, with 74 percent being under the influence of

some kind of drug at the time of arrest and three percent were under the influence of alcohol at the time of arrest. The survey also asked what specifically they were under the influence of at the time of arrest in terms of drugs and 44 percent of the women were under the influence of opiates, and 18 percent on methamphetamine.

Additionally, 24 out of the 27 women indicated that pain killers were their substance of choice, while methamphetamine was the second common drug used at 16 women whom were using.

### *Substance Use Narratives*

During the interviews I inquired about their substance use issues as well as how their significant other affected their substance abuse. One instance with Susie, her offense was possession of controlled substance, she stated that her significant other did introduce her to criminality and drug use, and there was also physical abuse within this relationship. Susie was also a chronic drug user of prescription drugs, specifically pain killers. She stated that she was high during the initial arrest because she needed to stay high to feed her addiction. She was sentenced to five years.

Many of these women in their narratives discussed several issues such as Susie's, lots of these issues all coincide with drug use, relationships with their significant other, and how stable their relationship was. Another instance where a woman had issues with her significant other and drug use was with Rebecca, her crime she was convicted with was possession and manufacturing of controlled substance. She lived with her significant other before her arrest, and they were married at the age of 16. Her significant other is currently in jail as well, but she believed their marriage was stable at

the time. They did commit crime together, and he did abuse her physically and verbally. She stated that often times after they would commit crime together they would also use substance together. Rebecca stated she was a chronic drug user or methamphetamines, but she was sober at the time of the crime. She committed the crime for the thrill of it and to make her significant other happy, as well as her substance abuse problem. She has a pending case of 10-20 years.

Jessica, similar to Rebecca had chronic substance use problem with methamphetamines as well, she was under the influence at the time of arrest and trafficked drugs with her significant other. Jessica was sentenced to 10 years.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

Increased criminality could have been because they were in an unstable relationship and their significant other did not want to visit, or it could have meant that their significant other was in jail and was not allowed to visit. Through narrative analysis generated during an interview process, prevalent predictors that surface alongside a few unique and interesting variations to the traditional life-course approach.

One important finding suggests that if the significant other introduced them into crime there was an association with the higher frequency number in arguments, which can lead to stability problems. The woman's onset of crime age was correlated to dating a criminal significant other at the time of first criminality. Background abuse from significant other, family member or stranger was also correlated to the frequency of arrests leading to believe that the more dysfunctional and bad home life lead to higher arrest rates. Higher rate of background abuse also correlated with education level of the offender, these women often had less than a high school diploma or only a GED. Also another correlation found through the database was if the female lived with a criminal significant other or cohabitated they were more likely to have an unstable employment, often fired and jumping from job to job.

Given that a life-course approach focuses on the role of marriage as a turning point, it becomes interesting to explore not only the role of marriage but other

relationship typologies by interviewing female offenders in order to determine relationship stability, perceptions of stability, and criminal significant others role in the females criminality. The research explored a variety of traditional criminogenic conditions which correlate and explain female criminality (e.g. substance abuse, physical/mental abuse, onset of first crime, employment, and previous criminal history); however, hypothesized, through narrative analysis generated during an interview process, prevalent predictors that surface alongside a few unique and interesting variations to the traditional life-course approach. Specifically, that criminal 'significant others' play an important role in why women initiate and persist in criminal behavior. As such, the research explores research questions which address if female criminality is in fact linked to "negative turning points" where low-quality relationships or marriages<sup>1</sup>, can not only assist in explaining not only why female criminality is escalating, but, also explain the shift in the intensification of female crime and the shift in 'new' types of female criminality.

Sampson & Laub (1993; 2006) suggest three turning points that aided in prevented criminality. Those three turning points, for men, involved employment, marriage, and military. When testing these turning points with female offenders, marriage becomes the strongest predictor as possible turning points, employment allows for insight into stability, and military becomes inclusive with females considering less than 15 percent of female members in the United States military and zero participants had military experience. Therefore marriage or relationship status becomes the key turning point in question. After conducting the research process three main

instances popped out within these women's route to criminality, first, the relationship status with their significant other (i.e., criminal significant other). Second, drug use with their SO (significant other) within criminal offending, and Last, their entrance into crime influenced by their significant other.

### *Relationship as the Key*

Research that has been conducted on female offending, and offending over the life course has often looked at marriage as being a turning point, or looking at violence within a marriage, as well as marriage being a positive turning point, or negative turning point. Research has found that marriage is often a positive turning point for men within the relationship because it moves them away from criminality (Sampson and Laub 2003). What new research has found on female offending is that marriage is not always a positive turning point for women, and that there are many new definitions of marriage and a relationship. Since in the modern era more couples are living together without the entitlement of a marriage or union, the definition of marriage within the life-course may have changed, and cohabitation within the relationship might be an important indicator. Researchers have started to examine this new definition of cohabitation within the relationship, and the harms that can be added to it such as criminality together, or substance abuse problems caused from it as well as many other definitions of harms. Within the proposed research narratives of women offenders contribute to the idea that relationship stability was a negative turning point for them. When running the quantitative analysis with the surveys, results found that 16 out of 27 of the women

commit crime with their significant other, with a mean of 17.8125 stating yes. Also finding that 24 out of the 27 women stated yes their significant other commit crimes.

#### *Limitations & Future Research*

In conclusion, and similar to many pilot studies this research consisted of a small sample size. And while results are not generalizable these findings provide a framework that can direct future research. As mentioned previously, Elder (1994) argues that the “interweave of age-graded trajectories....are subject to changing conditions and future options” (p. 13). Therefore, understanding female offending through a life-course analysis has the potential to penetrate empirical and theoretical work. That being said, this direction allows for a richer understanding if similar and future research targets larger and more diverse populations. Moreover, it should be noted that the survey should be modified to focus on more in-depth interviewing regarding cohabitation, drug use, and abuse considering that these variables were most likely to rise and address the research questions. By doing so, this should allow the research to run multi-variant analysis and therefore increase validity through more detailed surveys and an increase in the sample size of female respondents. It should also be highlighted that constructing typologies that point towards ‘stability’ among significant other relationships when those SO carry previous criminal history strongly predict the stability of marriage and/or relationships. It seems that the issue of ‘quality’ becomes undermined when issues of abuse, substance abuse, and perceived stability of relationship is measured.

Much of the literature supports these interactions. It should also be noted that domestic abuse might be a product of cultural environments, specifically within rural areas and therefore this type of study should be directed towards a variety of cultural and larger population environments. Finally, when a criminal significant other is a substance abuser, there is a strong correlation between female criminality, female substance abuse, and onset of criminality. Therefore, there seems to be some support for some early intervention for those women at risk, primarily through education and training. That is, when females are under correctional supervision, specific counseling should be provided to educate women regarding these issues. In turn, this could provide researchers and those interested in this area a stronger understanding of the roles of the boyfriends and/or husbands and how separation could potentially reduce the likelihood of future criminal behavior.

### *Future Implications*

As mentioned, this study sample was small and was tailored to a specific type of female offender, mainly low-level crimes, rural, and southern culture. As such, future should interview successful women and focus on 'positive turning points' they insulated or prevented them from becoming involved in criminality. Female offending is still under represented and under researched. There are many issues on the increase of female offending whether it be that women actually are committing crime at a higher rate from possibly a women's liberation movement and actually participating in crime more. Or whether it be from police are finally looking at women and realizing that they can commit crime as well, or from what my research presented such as significant other

problems and being introduced into criminality through unfortunate relationships and occurrences throughout their life-course.

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