

# EDWIN H. SUTHERLAND AND THE MICHAEL-ADLER REPORT: SEARCHING FOR THE SOUL OF CRIMINOLOGY SEVENTY YEARS LATER\*

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*In response to a devastating critique of the state of criminology known as the Michael-Adler Report, Edwin H. Sutherland created differential association theory as a paradigm for the field of criminology. I contend that Sutherland's strategy was flawed because he embraced a sociological model of crime and in doing so adopted a form of sociological positivism. Furthermore, Sutherland ignored key facts about crime that were contrary to his theoretical predilections. Recognizing that facts must come first and that criminology is an interdisciplinary field of study, I offer life-course criminology as a paradigm for understanding the causes and dynamics of crime. In addition, I identify three warning signs that I believe inhibit the advancement of criminology as a science and a serious intellectual enterprise.*

In 1932, Jerome Michael, a lawyer and a faculty member at Columbia University Law School, and Mortimer J. Adler, a philosopher and a faculty member at the University of Chicago, wrote a report assessing the state of criminology in the early part of the twentieth century. Prepared for the Bureau of Social Hygiene of New York City under the auspices of

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\* The 2005 Sutherland Award Address was delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Society of Criminology, Toronto, Canada, November 16, 2005. When I look at the list of those who have received the Edwin H. Sutherland Award from the American Society of Criminology, I am humbled and grateful for this honor. I thank Travis Hirschi, Rob Sampson, and Rick Rosenfeld for their insightful comments on an earlier version of this paper. I also thank Elaine Eggleston Doherty and Sarah Boonstoppel for their superb research assistance.

the School of Law at Columbia University, the report was eventually published in 1933 under the title *Crime, Law, and Social Science*.<sup>1</sup>

Following the mandate from the Bureau of Social Hygiene, Michael and Adler conducted “an examination and an evaluation of the state of knowledge and of the methods of research in the fields of criminology and criminal justice” (1933: xxiii). One of the purposes of the report was to determine whether it was suitable at that time “to establish an institute of criminology and of criminal justice in the United States” (1933: xxiii). In fact, Michael and Adler’s report contained a detailed proposal for a research institute with the express purpose to “conduct such research as may be necessary to lay the foundations of, and to begin the construction of, a science of criminology,” with special reference to the problem of crime causation (criminology) and the empirical study of criminal justice system processing and crime control (criminal justice) (1933: 394, see also 395–99). They proposed that staffing of the criminological division include a logician, a mathematician, a statistician, a theoretical physicist, an experimental physicist, a mathematical economist, a psychometrician, and “a criminologist who has a wide acquaintance with the literature of criminology, preferably one who has not himself engaged in criminological research!” (1933: 405–6, punctuation added). Staffing for the criminal justice division would come from the fields of legal philosophy and jurisprudence, history, with a special focus on the history of law and legal institutions, comparative law and criminal law and administrative codes, and policing, courts, and corrections (1933: 407–8).

I will not review in detail the results of the Michael-Adler report here, but wish to convey their general argument as Edwin H. Sutherland described in his review (1932–1933/1973), along with some direct quotes from the report.<sup>2</sup>

Michael and Adler reached three conclusions about the field of criminology.

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1. In addition to the Michael-Adler report itself, I draw on two additional sources for this introductory section: an introduction written by Gilbert Geis to the reprint edition of *Crime, Law, and Social Science* published in 1971 and “The Michael-Adler Report” written by Edwin H. Sutherland in 1932–33 and published in *Edwin H. Sutherland on Analyzing Crime*, edited by Karl Schuessler (1973).
  2. The Social Science Research Council created a special committee to review the Michael-Adler Report, especially the proposal for an Institute of Criminology and Criminal Justice (see Geis, 1971: xviii). Sutherland was a member of the committee and he participated in the review process. His report was published in the Sutherland papers (see Schuessler, 1973). Given the largely negative response from the special review committee, the Bureau of Social Hygiene decided not to establish the Institute of Criminology and Criminal Justice.

(1) *Criminological research has been futile.*

Michael and Adler were particularly harsh in their assessment here:

The work of criminologists has not yet resulted in scientific knowledge of the phenomena of crime. (in Sutherland, 1932–33/1973: 231)

The body of knowledge called criminology does not contain a single scientific proposition. (in Sutherland, 1932–33/1973: 231)

It is our thesis that criminological research has not achieved a single definite conclusion. (in Sutherland, 1932–33/1973: 231)

(2) *The reason for the futility of research in criminology is the incompetence of criminologists in science.*

Michael and Adler argued that “scientific method. . . consists in the proper co-operation of theoretical analysis, observation, and inference” and they characterized criminology as “raw empiricism. . . an exclusive emphasis upon observation to the total neglect of the abstractions of analysis” (in Sutherland, 1932–33/1973: 236).

They also asserted that “the assurance with which criminologists have advanced opinions regarding the causes of crime is in striking contrast to the worthlessness of the data upon which those opinions are based” (Michael and Adler, 1933: 169).

(3) *The current methods of criminological research should be abandoned, and scientists should be imported into criminology from other fields.*

Michael and Adler expressed it this way:

In short, (1) common sense knowledge is by itself inadequate to cope with the practical problems of controlling crime, and (2) the descriptive knowledge yielded by criminological research does not supplement common sense so as to compensate for its inadequacy. It is for these reasons that we recommend that criminological research of the kind which has been and is being used should not be continued. (in Sutherland, 1932–33/1973: 231)

An empirical science of criminology is not at present possible because no empirical sciences of psychology and sociology now exist. (in Geis, 1971: xi)

It is of tremendous social importance that a science of criminology be constructed. It must be constructed either by psychologists and sociologists or by others. But the psychologists and sociologists, because of their misconception or inadequate conception of the

nature of an empirical science and of the methodology of the empirical sciences, have shown themselves utterly incompetent to construct a science of criminology. Therefore, we must either abandon all efforts to construct such a science or we must turn to other men who are competent to construct it, if it can be constructed. (Michael and Adler, 1933: 406–07)

### SUTHERLAND'S RESPONSE

Initially, Sutherland responded to the Michael-Adler report by arguing that criminology was a “young science” and that “the conclusion. . . that criminological research is futile. . . is unwarranted and. . . the authors of the Report have set up an impossible and unjustifiable criterion for determining the value of such research” (1932–33/1973: 235). He argued that, furthermore, to blame the failure of criminology on the “incompetence of criminologists” was fallacious. Sutherland noted the now familiar litany of difficulties of doing good criminological research such as research on crime and criminal justice cannot be conducted in a laboratory, the difficulties of accessing institutions of crime control, the difficulties of accessing offenders, the lack of adequate research funding, and even heavy teaching loads! (241). He then offered a statement that could have been written last week: “It is surprising in view of the importance of this problem in social life that funds have not been available, for it is the lack of funds and equipment (together with the fact that serious research has been in progress for a relatively short period of time) that has prevented the production of a larger body of significant knowledge” (242).

Sutherland concluded his assessment of the report with the following statement.

My general reaction to the Report is that its condemnation of criminology as a science that has failed in its early years to produce the results that have been achieved in the mature sciences is unwarranted and that an attempt is being made to reinstate an extreme rationalism which has already been tried in all the social sciences and has been found to be unproductive. The authors are in effect recommending that we abandon an infant which is showing a healthy growth and adopt a mummy which has been dead for more than a century. (246)

Several years later, in assessing the development of his famous theory of differential association, Sutherland wrote

I had been affected, however, by several incidents which turned my attention toward abstract generalizations, and these occurred about the time I was preparing the manuscript for the 1934 edition

[*Principles of Criminology*], or perhaps a little later. Michael and Adler had published their critical appraisal of criminological research. My first reaction, lasting for a couple of years, was emotional antagonism. But I wish now to admit that it had a very important influence on me and turned my attention to abstract generalizations.<sup>3</sup> (1942/1973: 16)

Now is not the time or place to assess the contribution of Sutherland's famous theory of differential association. Indeed, such an assessment might be construed as impolite on the occasion of receiving the Edwin H. Sutherland award. It is enough to say that some think that differential association theory did not advance the field of criminology in the ways that Sutherland had hoped. For example, in 1956 Sheldon Glueck wrote that "the theory of differential association. . . fails to organize and integrate the findings of respectable research and is, at best, so general and puerile as to add little or nothing to the explanation, treatment, and prevention of delinquency" (92).

The central point here is that it appears that differential association theory was created in response to the Michael-Adler report. In arriving at the theory, Sutherland sought to identify a paradigm for the field of criminology. Although Sutherland should be commended for trying to organize the field around "abstract generalizations," I see serious problems with his approach. At risk now of being impolite, the problems with Sutherland's strategy were twofold. First, he sought to establish a sociological model of crime as the dominant paradigm in criminology by invoking a form of sociological positivism. Not unique to sociology, this form of positivism is defined as the "tendency to confuse the interests of one's discipline with the interests of scientific explanation" (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990: 73). Second, Sutherland rejected key facts about crime that were contrary to his sociological paradigm broadly defined and his theory of differential association specifically (see Laub and Sampson, 1991 for more details). The facts that Sutherland refused to confront pertained to the early onset of offending, the decline in offending with age, the stability of crime and deviance over the life course, and the role of individual differences in crime causation. As Gottfredson and Hirschi argue, "criminology, which came to be dominated by sociology, eventually saw the destruction of individual-level correlates as a prerequisite to 'truly social' theorizing" (1990: 70, note 3). Thus, sociological positivism as Sutherland practiced it did not attempt to establish the sociological causes of crime independent of individual-level factors in the Durkheimian tradition. Rather, crime was a social phenomenon

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3. Apparently, in informal discussions Sutherland "often agreed that the negative evaluations of criminological research in the Michael-Adler volume were essentially correct" (1932-33/1973: 230).

that could only be explained by social, that is, nonindividual, factors. As a result, Sutherland “explicitly denied the claims of all other disciplines potentially interested in crime” (1990: 70).

I think it is time for the field of criminology<sup>4</sup>—some seventy years after the Michael-Adler report—to revisit the idea of a paradigm.<sup>5</sup> Embracing an alternative strategy to Sutherland’s, I would argue that facts must come first. Ideas or “abstract generalizations” organize known facts about crime, known facts about offenders, known facts about the causes of crime, and known facts about the appropriate response to prevent and control crime. Indeed, as the German poet Goethe stated, “the most important thing would be to understand that everything factual is already theory” (1821/1982). As Per-Olof Wikstrom argues, theory and empirical research (that is, facts) answer “why questions” by establishing unobserved yet credible causal mechanisms (2006: 7–10).

Second, in my view, a paradigm for criminology should not be tied to any particular discipline. As I discuss in more detail below, disciplinary positivism and disciplinary hegemony are serious threats to criminology. Moreover, if one starts with a theory or a discipline, as Sutherland did, one can become blind to facts or, even worse, compelled to reject them. My goal in this address, much like Sutherland in his response to the Michael-Adler report, is to identify a paradigm for criminology—what I call the soul of criminology. For my purpose, soul is defined as the central or integral part of something, the vital core. Paradigms help us organize facts and set research agendas; that is, they organize the field. Robert Merton has argued that “paradigms advance the cumulation of theoretical interpretation. In this connection, we can regard the paradigm as the foundation upon which the house of interpretations is built” (1949: 15).

## THE PRINCIPLES OF LIFE-COURSE CRIMINOLOGY

*“Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passion, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence.” — John Adams, 1770*

Criminology is an exciting field of study focusing on topics such as the origins of social order, the sources of crime and violence, and state

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4. Using the classic definition of criminology from Sutherland, I see criminology as encompassing criminal justice as well as the sociology of law. “Criminology is the body of knowledge regarding . . . the processes of making laws, of breaking laws, and of reacting toward the breaking of laws” (Sutherland and Cressey, 1955: 3).
  5. I am using paradigm here as “systematizing the concepts and problems of a given domain of inquiry in compact form” (Sztompka, 1996: 10; see also Merton, 1949: 12–16 and Kuhn, 1970).

reactions to crime, violence, and disorder. These topics have challenged social thinkers for centuries and there appear to be no easy answers to the big questions facing the field. For example, what (if anything) motivates an individual to commit acts of crime? Does the propensity to offend vary across individuals? Why is crime concentrated across time and space? Why do only some societies have high rates of crime and violence? What can the state do (if anything) to prevent and control crime?

I wish to advance the argument that “life-course criminology,” as Rob Sampson and I have called it, provides a starting point for answering these and many other prominent questions facing the field. If the primary tasks of science are description and explanation, life-course criminology succeeds on both counts. In addition to describing the trajectories of criminal behavior over the life span, life-course criminology offers answers to fundamental questions about the causes of crime and delinquency, why some offenders persist in offending over time, and why some offenders desist from crime, to name but a few. Finally, life-course criminology can accommodate various disciplines, for example, sociology, psychology, economics, history, and even biology.

Sampson and I have spent nearly twenty years examining the life course of crime. In identifying the principles of life-course criminology I have primarily drawn on our long-term project examining longitudinal data from Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck’s classic study, *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency* (1950, 1968), and subsequent follow-up studies (see Laub and Sampson, 1988, 1993, 1995, and 2003; Laub et al., 1995; and Sampson and Laub, 1990, 1992, 1993, 1997, 2003, and 2005a for details).<sup>6</sup> Our position on life-course criminology was recently presented in a special issue of *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (November 2005) titled *Developmental Criminology and Its Discontents: Trajectories of Crime from Childhood to Old Age*, with a full debate on the distinction between life-course and developmental criminology.

I have identified five principles of life-course criminology and believe that these can provide the basis of a paradigm on the causes and dynamics of crime for the field. In turn, this body of knowledge can be referred to as the core, that is, the soul of criminology.

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6. Despite the fact that others have laid claim to originating the concept of life-course criminology, I believe the historical record is clear on this point. In reviewing the history of life-course criminology, I wish to acknowledge the work of Hagan and Palloni who argued that delinquent and criminal events “are linked into life trajectories of broader significance, whether those trajectories are criminal or noncriminal in form” (1988: 90). However, Hagan and Palloni did not offer a theory of crime or a systematic model.

## SOCIAL TIES

Allen Liska (1992) defines social control as any structure, process, relationship, or act that contributes to the social order. I see social control as the capacity of a social group to regulate itself according to desired principles and values, and hence to make norms and rules effective (Janowitz, 1975: 82; Kornhauser, 1978; Reiss, 1951). Social ties are the glue of social connectivity and it follows that the stronger the social ties, the tighter the social control. The emphasis here is on informal social controls that emerge from the role reciprocities and structures of interpersonal ties that link members of society to one another and to the wider social institutions of society (Kornhauser, 1978: 24).

In analyzing the Glueck data, we found that the strongest and most consistent effects on both official and unofficial delinquency flow from the social processes of family, school, and peers. Low levels of parental supervision, weak parental attachment, and erratic, threatening, and harsh discipline were strongly related to delinquency. In addition, school attachment had large negative effects on delinquency independent of family processes. Moreover, attachment to delinquent peers had a significant positive effect on delinquency regardless of family and school process. Further analyses did reveal, however, that family and school processes appear most important in the causal chain (for more details, see Sampson and Laub, 1993: chapters 4 and 5).

There have been scores of studies on family, school, peers, and crime, and in my view, the evidence is overwhelming that when social ties linking an individual to society are weak, the probability of crime and delinquency increases. The first principle, then, is that *crime is more likely to occur when an individual's ties to society are attenuated.*

## CONTINUITY

A staple of life-course research is that traits formed early on and childhood experiences are linked to later adolescent and adult development. The belief is that these developmental processes are interrelated. The available data bear this out, revealing strong continuity in antisocial behavior from childhood through adulthood across a variety of life domains. This demonstrates that individual traits and childhood experiences are important in understanding behavioral stability across the life span.

In our analyses of the Glueck data, we found that independent of age, IQ, neighborhood SES, and ethnicity, the original delinquents and nondelinquents displayed behavioral consistency—both homotypic and heterotypic—well into adulthood. Indeed, delinquency and other forms of antisocial conduct in childhood were strongly related to troublesome adult



behavior, including crime, incarceration, economic dependency, unemployment, marital discord, and divorce (for more details see Sampson and Laub, 1993: chapter 6).

The evidence for behavioral continuity is impressive and remains one of the most robust findings in social science. The second principle, then, is that *delinquency and other forms of antisocial behavior in childhood are strongly related to troublesome adult behaviors including crime as well as other problem behaviors in a variety of life domains.*

## CHANGE

One of the themes of life-course research is the constancy of change. The basic assumption is that human development and aging are life-long processes. In our work with the Glueck data, we find strong support for the idea of behavioral change over the life course. Specifically, childhood pathways to crime and conformity over the life course are significantly influenced by adult social ties. Salient life events and socialization experiences (or the lack of them) in adolescence and adulthood can counteract, at least to some extent, the influence of early life experiences. In other words, experiences in adolescence and adulthood can redirect criminal trajectories in either a more positive or more negative manner. For example, we found job stability and marital attachment in adulthood were significantly related to changes in adult crime: the stronger the adult ties to work and family, the less crime and deviance among both delinquents and nondelinquent controls. Turning points were critical to understanding processes of change (for more details, see Sampson and Laub, 1993: chapters 7 and 8).

The evidence for malleability is strong. Indeed, if we begin with children and follow their paths to adulthood, we find considerable heterogeneity in adult outcomes. Simply put, adult trajectories of offending among former delinquents cannot be reduced to the past. The question of predicting adult criminal trajectories among troubled children and adolescents is not easy if one limits the causal matrix to childhood endowments. The fact is there are important variations in adult criminal trajectories that cannot be predicted from childhood (for more details, see Laub and Sampson, 2003: chapter 5). The third principle, then, is that *social ties embedded in adult transitions explain variation in crime unaccounted for by childhood propensities. The adult life course matters.*

## HUMAN AGENCY

In life-course criminology, human beings are not viewed as passive entities. In our most recent study of the Glueck men, we discovered that the men were not blank slates any more than they were temperamental

rubes or rational actors in an unconstrained market of life chances. They were active participants in constructing difficult lives, challenging dominant perspectives that reify persons as fixed entities and that miss the dynamic, relational aspects of social life. Much like the marginalized and damaged men in the recent film *Mystic River*, the Glueck men operated in a complex interaction of life-course transitions such as marriage, macro-level historical events, changing situational contexts, and individual will.

In our work, a major factor in the desistance process was human agency—the purposeful execution of choice and individual will (Matza, 1964). Specifically, we found that personal conceptions about the past and future were often transformed as men maneuvered through the transition from adolescence to adulthood. This process can be referred to as “transformative action.” Although informed by the past, such action-oriented agency is directed toward the future (and hence a future self). Projective actions in the transition from adolescence to adulthood included an advancement of a new sense of self and identity as one who desists from crime or, perhaps more aptly, as a family man, hard worker, and good provider. As a result, the men we studied were active participants in the choice to give up crime (for more details see Laub and Sampson, 2003: chapter 6).

Human agency is also important in understanding persistent offending. Some men simply insist on a criminal lifestyle, not out of impulsivity or lack of knowledge of future consequences, but rather because of the rewards of crime (Katz, 1988) or a willful resistance to perceived domination (Sherman, 1993)—all at the expense of the future self (for more details, see Laub and Sampson, 2003: chapter 7).

In short, human agency induces an apparent instability or random component into life-course turning points, making neat prediction—even from adult factors—inherently a difficult if not an impossible endeavor. Turning points and structural supports may be necessary conditions in our theory of continuity and change over time, but they are not sufficient. Human beings make choices to participate in crime or not to do so, and it would be remiss to leave agency—which is essentially social action—out of the criminological landscape. The fourth principle, then, is that *human agency is vitally important to understanding patterns of stability and change in criminal behavior over the life course. Individuals, whether criminal actors or not, make choices and are active participants in the construction of their lives.*

## PREVENTION AND REFORM

One of the best-known findings in criminological research is that a small group of delinquents (6 percent) account for a disproportionate

share (more than half) of all criminal acts (Wolfgang, Figlio, and Sellin, 1972). A lesser-known finding, though one of far more importance, stems from research by Donald West and David Farrington (1977). In their study of boys in London, West and Farrington found that fewer than 5 percent of the families accounted for almost half of the criminal convictions in the entire sample (109). Such a finding highlights the role that families play in the causation of crime, especially relating to parent training in monitoring, recognizing, and disciplining the misbehavior of children. Efforts should be devoted to strengthening families to help prevent crime and other problem behaviors.

Moreover, based on our research and others, it appears that youth problems—delinquency, substance abuse, violence, dropping out, teen pregnancy, and the like—often share common risk characteristics (Jessor and Jessor, 1977). Furthermore, these “packages of problems” often extend into adulthood (Cairns and Cairns, 1994). Intervention strategies should consider a broad array of antisocial, criminal, and deviant behaviors, and not simply limit prevention to one subgroup or crime type. Comprehensive strategies that focus on a wider range of concurrent problem behaviors are needed. As David Farrington has argued, “because of the link between crime and numerous other social problems, any measure that succeeds in reducing crime will probably have benefits that go far beyond this. Early prevention efforts that reduce crime will probably also reduce alcohol abuse, drunk driving, drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, and family violence, and probably also school failure, unemployment, marital disharmony, and divorce” (1990: 110).

Despite these continuities, many offenders change their behavior over time. From our research, it is clear that understanding the factors that lead to desistance from crime is important in shaping interventions that reduce recidivism. This moves the field away from the narrow idea that prevention strategies administered early on in life are the only feasible ones for reducing criminal behavior.

Although there are multiple pathways to desistance, a few important general processes, mechanisms of desistance, appear to be at work. The four significant factors we have found in our long-term follow-up study are marriage and spouses; the military; work; and neighborhood change. What appears to be important about these processes is that they all involve, to varying degrees, the following items: a knifing off of the past from the present, new situations that provide both supervision and monitoring as well as new opportunities of social support and growth, and new situations that provide the opportunity for transforming identity—a process that one author has referred to as “movement from a hell-raiser to a family man” (Hill, 1971; for more details, see Laub and Sampson, 2003: chapter 6).

Given stability and change in crime and deviance over the life span, policies and programs to develop and strengthen social ties across an array of social institutions are needed. Moreover, this notion applies to each stage of the life course. Pathways and turning points serve as useful metaphors in developing such policy. The concept of pathways suggests that some individuals are set on a stable track toward delinquency and adult crime through the combined negative influence of poor parenting, weak school attachment, and cumulative disadvantage from criminal justice and juvenile justice sanctions. This calls for policies that prevent crime. At the same time, the notion of turning points suggests that pathways can be deflected by positive developments that strengthen ties to key institutions in society. This calls for policies that reduce recidivism. The fifth principle, then, is that *a dual policy focus emphasizing prevention and reform should be the central feature of criminal justice practices.*

### ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Of course, other elements could be added to the soul of criminology. For example, given that criminology focuses on rule making as well as rule breaking, life-course criminology has shown that delinquency is part of normative adolescent development. Moffitt, for example, states that delinquency in adolescence “is not pathological behavior” because “its prevalence is so great that it is normative rather than abnormal” (1993: 692). Data from the National Youth Survey, a nationwide self-report survey of youth in the United States, confirms that delinquency is near ubiquitous in adolescence (see Elliott and Ageton, 1980; for a more general overview of adolescent crime, see Rutter, Giller, and Hagell, 1998: 30–45). The irony here is that if delinquency and drug use are viewed as a normative stage in adolescent development, society’s reaction to that delinquency may result in weakened bonds and continued delinquency. For instance, Moffitt argues that some continued delinquent behavior among what she calls “adolescent-limited offenders” is a consequence of “snares” (1993, 1994) resulting from official intervention of normative adolescent deviance. This intervention may feed the process of cumulative disadvantage, which posits that delinquency incrementally mortgages the future by generating negative consequences for the life chances of stigmatized and institutionalized youth (see Sampson and Laub, 1997).

Furthermore, although much of life-course criminology focuses on individuals, macro-level relationships are also enormously important. For example, to what extent do varying rates of marriage, employment, military service, and incarceration over time account for changes in crime rates? Does variation in social ties account for disparate rates of rule breaking across societies? Finally, what are the prospects for integrating a

community-level focus with a focus on within-individual variability? More specifically, is a dynamic concept like collective efficacy at the community level equivalent to variation in age-graded informal social control at the individual level? Sampson has argued that “the study of crime. . . requires a renewed focus on the unfolding of social action, process, and change within both individuals and communities” (2000: 713). The challenge, of course, of such cross-level integration is methodological (for example, sorting out selection effects) and theoretical (for example, specifying the underlying social mechanisms that generate criminal behavior at the individual and community level).

### WARNING SIGNS ON THE HORIZON

*“It’s tough to make predictions, especially about the future.”*  
— Yogi Berra

Many challenges face the field of criminology as it continues to grow and become more diverse. One challenge is of course diversity itself. As criminology grows, the discipline tends more and more to provide a critical mass for the many subgroups and specialities within the field, so much so that we are in danger of becoming hopelessly fragmented. I have always thought that the special attraction of the field of criminology has always been its commitment to the idea that people with wide-ranging interests, specialities, and perspectives could unite in the study of a single important social problem. What, then, does the future hold for criminology? I see three areas of concern and challenge on the criminological horizon.

### THE DANGERS OF DISCIPLINARY BLINDERS

In my 2003 presidential address to the American Society of Criminology, I argued that one of the turning points in the field was Sutherland’s attack on the interdisciplinary research program on criminal careers initiated by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck (see Laub, 2004). For Sutherland, the Gluecks’ multiple-factor approach to crime represented a symbolic threat to the intellectual status of sociological criminology, and his attack served the larger interests of sociology in establishing proprietary rights to criminology (see Laub and Sampson, 1991 for more details).

The Sutherland tradition of raising disciplinary questions as a way of dismissing criminological facts is apparently alive and well in criminology. Consider for a moment the following. William Chambliss in a recent review of my book, *Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives: Delinquent Boys to Age 70*, coauthored with Rob Sampson, stated “but there are patterns in the rates of deviance or crime of different groups

that cry out for *sociological* as opposed to *psychological* explanations. Laub and Sampson might have come closer to finding a scientifically useful *theory* had they asked a *sociological* rather than a *psychological* question” (2005: 1814, emphasis added). What is so wrong with drawing on other disciplines like psychology if they add to our understanding of crime? In our book, we cite Richard Lewontin (2000), a biologist, whose work revealed important and unique insight into the conception of development. I believe it is no coincidence that Chambliss wrote these sentences knowing that the review would be appearing in one of the most prestigious journals in sociology, the *American Journal of Sociology*. Ignoring the fact that sociologists may value psychological insights, Chambliss is able to dismiss our findings by evoking a form of sociological positivism. As Travis Hirschi told me, “whatever his purpose, the effect, as usual, is to undermine the factual foundations of the field” (personal correspondence, September 6, 2005).

The question of whether a paper or a book contributes to our understanding of crime should not be dictated by the disciplinary focus of the research, or the disciplinary origins of the authors. Hirschi and Gottfredson have argued that efforts to construct theories based on a priori disciplinary principles have been woefully unsatisfying (1990; see also Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990: chapters 3 and 4). This is “substantive positivism—the view that ‘science’ favors or even requires particular theories or modes of explanation” (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1990: 426, note 1). When criminology looks to single disciplines such as sociology, psychology, or economics, the field does not advance in large part because those disciplines seek to establish institutional hegemony by imposing their research agenda on the field of criminology.

#### THE BANKRUPTCY OF METHOD WITHOUT THEORY

In a recent exchange that appeared in the November issue of *Criminology* with Daniel Nagin and Richard Tremblay about the role of statistical methods in criminology (see Nagin and Tremblay, 2005a, Sampson and Laub, 2005b, and Nagin and Tremblay, 2005b), Sampson and I were accused of being seduced by “THE Theory of Crime” (2005b: 916, the capitalization is in the original, although it is not clear why).<sup>7</sup> Nagin and Tremblay go on to make the claim that, “compared to most other sciences, criminology, in fact, has been more seduced by theory than by method” (2005b: 916). Instead of theory, Nagin and Tremblay argue for “the advancement of instruments that enable collection and analysis of

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7. Nagin and Tremblay also accused us of being passionate (2005b: 915). We are indeed passionate about our work and our ideas. We thank them for recognizing this characteristic of our research.

data that better approximates reality” and in so doing refer to the work of Galileo, Copernicus, Newton, and Einstein (2005b: 916).

I have no quarrel with the idea that data from a variety of sources of measurement that are properly analyzed by statistical tools can provide “the grist for theories to explain” (Nagin and Tremblay, 2005b: 918). However, it is a mistake to conflate measurement with a statistical program—they are logically and in practice separable.<sup>8</sup> Travis Hirschi’s *Causes of Delinquency* (1969) was all about measurement and theory and it used cross-tabulations! Furthermore, Nagin and Tremblay have an incorrect view of theory and this could not be made more clear than by quoting their own words. They write, “theories need to be based on the best possible description of the phenomenon under study. Yet even then theories are generally little more than simpleminded human brain products offered for falsification” (2005b: 918). The point I wish to make here is that without theory scientific explanation is not possible. Wikstrom has argued that “empirical research can establish *correlations*, allow us to make *predictions*, and sometimes demonstrate *causes* by manipulation (experimentation). However, only theory can provide *explanation* by answering why questions (why does X cause Y), and thereby, specifying *how* the studied outcome is produced by the putative cause” (2006: 8, emphasis in original).<sup>9</sup> Thus, theory must be intimately connected to empirical research and empirical research must be intimately connected to theory (see Merton, 1949: chapters 2 and 3; Hirschi and Selvin, 1973: chapter 11).<sup>10</sup> However, statistical methods are tools for both theory and research and are not ends in themselves.

Ironically, the 1933 Michael and Adler report offers a sharp critique of Nagin and Tremblay’s position. Michael and Adler argue that “the literature of criminology clearly illustrates the impossibility of scientific research in the absence of a theory” (1933: 65). They elaborate:

A science cannot come into existence in a given field until a theory or an analysis has been constructed. Prior to the existence of a theory it is impossible for scientific research to be done. . . . A

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8. Nagin and Tremblay seemingly confuse statistical method (for example, LISREL, HLM, or TRAJ), methodology (for example, a logic of scientific procedure), and measurement, which contains a large body of theory.
  9. Wikstrom astutely notes that “sometimes the use of statistical modeling to predict crime is wrongly equated with explaining crime” (2006: 61, note 7).
  10. Stanley Lieberman points out that “it is incorrect to link data with theory in the way it is normally done. It is incorrect because in practice the two are manifestations of the same principles. A theory of data is needed as part of any theory about anything. In some sense, we need a theory that tells us what causes the data to be there as well as what causes them to be associated in a particular way” (1985: 230–31). Yet another reminder that method and theory cannot be separated.

science grows both by the development of its theory and by improvements in its techniques for gaining evidence, *but a science must first exist before it can grow*. (65, emphasis in original)

Sutherland's response to this critique of criminology was to move the field to "abstract generalizations," a theory of crime. What I have argued here is that criminology should adopt life-course criminology as its paradigm for the causes and dynamics of crime. Regardless of which paradigm is accepted, the inherent challenge for any statistical tool in the criminological toolbox is answering directly and without obfuscation, what have we learned from this particular method that has enhanced our understanding of crime over the life span.

### WITHOUT HISTORY WE HAVE NO BEARINGS

I believe that there is a "presentism" in the field of criminology that is contrary to the spirit of a healthy, intellectually vibrant enterprise (see Laub, 2004 for more details). As the historian Marc Bloch has pointed out, "misunderstanding of the present is the inevitable consequence of ignorance of the past" (1964: 43). The fact is that many, if not all, of the so-called current issues in criminology have a long history. The historian David McCullough says that history is "an antidote to the hubris of the present" (as quoted in Will, 2005: A27).

But even more concerning is that without history we are faced with an uncertain future. Daniel Boorstein, historian and librarian of Congress, stated that "trying to plan for the future without knowing the past is like trying to plant cut flowers" (as quoted in Will, 2005: A27). Indeed, criminology needs to develop a meaningful narrative about its historical development in order to chart a course for its future (see Laub, 2004 for more details). So what is the historical mission for criminology? As outlined by Donald Kagan, professor of classics and history at Yale University, in his 2005 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities this past year, the task would be

to examine important events of the past with painstaking care and the greatest possible objectivity, to seek a reasoned explanation for them based on the fullest and fairest possible examination of the evidence in order to preserve their memory and to use them to establish such uniformities as may exist in human events, and then to apply the resulting understanding to improve the judgement and wisdom of people who must deal with similar problems in the future. (2005: 9)

The history of criminology is a story waiting to be told.<sup>11</sup>

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11. For more on the importance of history as telling a story see "On Learning from the



## CONCLUSION

Edwin H. Sutherland was undoubtedly the most influential criminologist of the twentieth century. With courage and foresight, Sutherland responded to Jerome Michael's and Mortimer J. Adler's potentially devastating critique of criminology by stepping back, assessing the field, and eventually raising the ante by establishing differential association theory as the paradigm for the field of criminology. That said, fast forward seventy years later, perhaps the very idea of a paradigm for the field of criminology is a fool's errand. However, I cannot help myself. The Boston Red Sox have given me hope that anything is possible.

Nevertheless, I am well aware that there are problems facing modern day criminology. In fact, an equally challenging critique of criminology was recently put forward by Joachim Savelsberg and Rob Sampson (2002) in their assessment of the relationship between criminology and sociology.<sup>12</sup> Although Savelsberg and Sampson offer six theses on the state of criminology and its prospects for the future, I focus on only one of the six here—"criminology is not a discipline,<sup>13</sup> as it does not have an intellectual core" (2002: 99). Specifically, Savelsberg and Sampson argue that though criminology has a subject matter, it does not have a "unique methodological commitment or paradigmatic theoretical framework" (2002: 101). Furthermore, they contend that in criminology "there are no common assumptions or guiding insights. There is no intellectual idea that animates criminology" (2002: 101).

For me, criminology is best served as an interdisciplinary field of study of the problem of crime and social order.<sup>14</sup> In part, I am biased here by my graduate training in the School of Criminal Justice at the State University of New York at Albany in the 1970s. At that time, the faculty included criminologists, lawyers, sociologists, psychologists, statisticians, as well as those trained in public administration and criminal justice. It is hard to

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Greeks" (Cole, 2005). Also, the notion used for the subheading in this section, "without history we have no bearings," comes from the same source.

12. For extensive overview of the relationship between sociology and criminology see Short with Hughes, 2006. For an interesting view on the relationship between the sociology of deviance and criminology see Uggen, 2003.
13. It may be worth noting that in 1963 Marvin Wolfgang argued that "criminology should be considered as an autonomous, separate discipline of knowledge because it has accumulated its own set of organized data and theoretical conceptualizations that use the scientific method" (156). Wolfgang went on to say that "the maturity of a discipline involves increasing interdependence [across other disciplines]" (157).
14. An important analysis of interdisciplinary efforts can be found in Abbott (2001: 131–36). He argues that "interdisciplinary studies are ultimately dependent on specialized disciplines to generate new theories and methods. Interdisciplinarity presupposes disciplines" (2001: 135).

imagine a more interdisciplinary department or school. An added benefit of being a field of study as opposed to a discipline is that criminology can avoid substantive positivism, a threatening virus that seems to infect all disciplines. So the idea that criminology is not a discipline does not bother me and may in fact be an advantage, not unlike what is happening today with respect to the study of life sciences.

However, as I have argued, I do believe that life-course criminology can provide the field of criminology the “guiding insights” and “intellectual ideas” about the causes and dynamics of crime that Savelsberg and Sampson see as lacking in the current state of affairs. Moreover, life-course criminology is consistent with known facts about crime and has the advantage of being interdisciplinary. In the end, by embracing life-course criminology, I believe the soul of criminology would be uncovered. Now, if we can only do something about the Chicago Cubs.

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