

Desistance from delinquency: The marriage effect revisited and extended [☆]

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Abstract

Desistance from criminal offending has become the source of a considerable amount of research attention. Much of this literature has examined how environmental factors, such as marriage, employment, and delinquent peers contribute to the desistance process. A relatively unexplored possibility, however, is that desistance from criminal behavior is partially due to genetic factors. To test this possibility, data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) were used to examine the effects that five different genetic polymorphisms (DAT1, DRD2, DRD4, 5HTT, and MAOA) have on desistance from delinquent involvement. Three broad findings emerged. First, marriage significantly increased desistance. Second, some of the genetic polymorphisms had significant independent effects on desistance. Third, for males, the genetic polymorphisms interacted with marital status to predict variation in desistance. The findings underscore the importance of using a biosocial perspective to examine factors related to criminal desistance.

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1. Introduction

Involvement in delinquency rises markedly in the beginning of adolescence, peaks around the ages of eight and nineteen, and begins to decline sharply thereafter (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1983). By early adulthood most people have “aged out” of delinquent involvement and adult criminal activity is confined to a relatively small pool of chronic offenders (DeLisi, 2005). Although the age-crime curve is one of the most

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firmly established empirical regularities within criminology, the reasons that account for desistance remain the source of debate (Collins, 2004; Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Sampson and Laub, 1993, 2005; Laub and Sampson, 2003; Moffitt, 1993; Warr, 1998). One of the more prominent explanations of desistance, and one that has achieved a considerable amount of empirical support, is Sampson and Laub's (1993) age-graded theory of informal social control. The theory posits that involvement in conventional social institutions, such as marriage, employment, and military, contributes to de-escalation in offending frequency among habitual offenders, even those with a seemingly high criminal propensity. One of the main findings to emerge out of their analysis—and one that paralleled the findings garnered in other studies—was that criminal behavior was relatively stable over long periods of time. Unlike most other extant theorists, Sampson and Laub also noted that some offenders—even those with lengthy criminal records—eventually desisted from engaging in unlawful acts. The question thus became: What factors account for criminal desistance?

To answer this question, Sampson and Laub extended the logic of Hirschi's (1969) social bonding theory into adulthood. Through extensive face-to-face interviews with participants of the Glueck sample and through quantitative analysis of the data, Sampson and Laub discovered that desistance from offending was related to three adult social bonds: employment, marriage, and military service. Offenders who had married, who had gained lawful employment, or who had a history of military service were much more likely to desist from crime than those offenders who lacked these bonds.

The relationship between adult social bonds and desistance from crime was relatively straightforward: once an individual begins to accumulate social capital, such as being married or obtaining a steady job, they have a stake in conformity. Any type of criminal action jeopardizes their social standing in conventional society. An arrest, for example, may cause a spouse to file for a marital dissolution. On the other hand, individuals who fail to develop adult social bonds will have much less to lose by engaging in crime and therefore they will be at-risk for persisting with their antisocial behavior throughout adulthood.

Although Sampson and Laub (1993) identified three different types of adult social bonds, research analyzing the predictors of criminal desistance has centered primarily on marriage. As a result, we follow the lead of other scholars and examine the effect that marriage has on desistance from delinquent involvement. We also explore the potential reasons why some married people desist from offending, whereas other married people persist with their antisocial conduct. Specifically, we examine whether five genetic polymorphisms (DAT1, DRD2, DRD4, 5HTT, and MAOA) condition the effect that marriage has on criminal desistance using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health).

2. Literature review

2.1. Marriage and desistance

The most compelling evidence linking changes in marital status to desistance from crime comes from a series of studies by Sampson, Laub, and their colleagues utilizing data originally collected by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck in the early 20th century (Laub and Sampson, 1993, 2001, 2003; Sampson and Laub, 1993, 2005; Sampson et al., 2006). In this work, a variety of sophisticated analytical procedures evaluated whether marriage has a causal effect on reducing criminal behavior. In one of the first studies investigating this possibility, Sampson and Laub (1993) found that marital attachment significantly increased the chances that an offender would desist from criminal involvement. Similar findings were reported in follow-up studies using both quantitative and qualitative data (Sampson and Laub, 1993). Most recently, Sampson et al. (2006) analyzed yearly data by using a counterfactual research design that employed inverse probability of treatment weighting. The findings generated from this statistical approach revealed convincing evidence linking marriage to desistance. The marriage-desistance association has also been corroborated by researchers using different samples, collected much more recently, and analyzed with different methodological strategies (Farrington and West, 1995; Horney et al., 1995). Taken together, the results of these publications have revealed that even after controlling for individual characteristics, such as latent antisocial personality traits, and even after controlling for prior childhood and adolescent risk factors, and even after taking into account the possibility of selection effects, marriage continues to exert an independent effect on desistance (Laub and Sampson, 2001; Sampson and Laub, 2005).

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