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# Adult Family Relationships and Desistance from Crime

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF CRIMINOLOGY AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE

ADULT FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS AND DESISTANCE FROM  
CRIME

By

WALTER FORREST

A Dissertation submitted to the  
College of Criminology and Criminal Justice  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

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She don't like that kind of behavior.

So, throw down your guns.

Don't be so reckless.

— James Reyne, “Reckless (Don't Be So)”.

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## ABSTRACT

Despite considerable evidence that certain life-course transitions can play a significant role in helping some offenders abandon crime, several fundamental issues remain unresolved. In this dissertation, I examine the links between crime and two life-course transitions related to the development of families in adulthood: cohabitation and marriage. Using data from the National Youth Survey (NYS), I investigate the extent to which both types of relationships can contribute to desistance. I then evaluate the major theoretical mechanisms through which marriage is most likely to promote behavioral change. Finally, I examine the degree to which these relationships foster desistance for both men and women. Results indicate that marriage has the capacity to promote desistance, whereas cohabitation does not, and that the effects of marriage on crime are conditional on both the social orientation of the spouse and the quality of the marital relationship. These and other results are mostly consistent with social control and social learning theories of crime and desistance. In addition, the results of the analyses indicate that the effects of marriage on crime are similar among men and women.

## CHAPTER 1

“One of the best known facts about crime” is that criminal involvement rises fairly rapidly in early adolescence, peaks in the late teenage years, and then declines steadily in adulthood (Nagin, Farrington, and Moffit 1995, p. 112; see also Farrington 1986). As these patterns imply, the overwhelming majority of people who engage in crime do so in the latter years of adolescence only to abandon it shortly thereafter (Farrington 1986). Despite the consistency of these patterns and their documentation in published research since the early 1800s (Hirschi and Gottfredson 1983), criminologists have only recently begun to show an interest in explaining why people give up on crime and delinquency. For much of its history, criminology as a discipline has tried to understand the causes of crime by trying to explain criminal participation. Rather than attempting to explain either the initiation of delinquency or its termination, the dominant modus operandi in criminological research has been to identify the characteristics that distinguished criminals from non-criminals. Given that criminal participation is most common in adolescence, this research agenda has focused, not surprisingly, on the teenage years. As a result, the task of explaining why people commit crime often has given way to the task of identifying the correlates of delinquent participation at one stage of the life-course (Laub and Sampson 1992).

Ironically, the study of desistance — the term used by criminologists to describe the abandonment of crime — took off as a field of study as a result of the realization that a small proportion of juvenile delinquents do not abandon crime in early adulthood. These serious, chronic offenders who accounted for the majority of offences committed by their cohort (Wolfgang, Figlio and Sellin 1972) became a real concern of researchers and policy-makers in the 1980s and lead to substantial interest in the development of criminal and delinquent behavior over the lifespan (Blumstein et al 1986; Blumstein and Cohen 1987). As this research tried to reconcile the persistent criminal behavior exhibited by this smaller group with the large-scale desistance that occurred in early adulthood (e.g. Moffit 1993), it became increasingly apparent that the macro-level relationship between age and crime obscured a considerable degree of micro-level variation in rates of offending over time (Nagin and Land 1993; Nagin, Farrington and Moffit 1995; Bushway

et al 2001, 2003). Recognition of these variations has prompted considerable research aimed at explaining these trends and patterns, especially as they pertain to differences in the scope and duration of criminal careers.

The shift in focus, from a preoccupation with explaining inter-individual differences in criminal behavior at one stage of the life-course to a concern with the causes of crime as they develop over the lifespan, has been accompanied by the emergence of a “new paradigm” known as life-course criminology (Laub 2006). The adoption of the life-course perspective entails, among other things, sensitivity to the social and historical conditions that affect human lives, variability in developmental processes, the role of personal choice and human agency in personal development, and the interconnectedness of different facets of human lives. More than anything, however, the life-course perspective is distinguished by its focus on developmental change, including changes in criminal behavior, as a life-long process (Elder 1994, 1995; Benson 2002; Laub and Sampson 2003; Sampson and Laub 2003; Laub 2006).

Recognition of the importance of studying human lives in their entirety has lead researchers to place greater emphasis on long-term longitudinal studies that enable them to observe changes in offending patterns even into late adulthood (Laub and Sampson 2003, Blokland and Nieuwbeerta 2005). Despite continued debates about the prevalence of persistent offending over the lifespan, the results of these studies indicate that even serious, chronic and seemingly persistent offenders eventually desist from crime at some point in their lives (Laub and Sampson 2003). In other words, offenders vary in the timing and occurrence of their desistance — not the likelihood that they will desist from crime. In terms of the development of criminological theory, the apparent inevitability of desistance implies two things. First, unless criminologists are prepared to abandon the task of explaining the most prevalent aspects of criminal and delinquent behavior, they need to develop an explanation for criminal desistance. Second, the focus of that research should shift from preoccupation about who desists and why to an exploration of the reasons why people give up crime at different stages of their lives.

## **Life-Course Transitions and Desistance**

Given that the overwhelming majority of people who become involved in crime abandon it in early adulthood, it is hardly surprising that the changes in the life-course that most commonly occur in the early and mid-20s have emerged as some of the most important correlates of desistance. In numerous studies, researchers have observed strong empirical relationships between the occurrence of significant age-graded life-events and changes in criminal and delinquent behavior (Sampson and Laub 1993, Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998, Warr 1998). These developments — often described as life-course transitions because they reflect significant changes in social roles, responsibilities, and status — include marriage, the commencement of full-time employment, and military service (Elder 1986; Laub and Sampson 2003; Laub, Sampson and Allen 2001). Some of these life-events are associated with individual changes in offending in the short-term (Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995) and over an extended range of the lifespan (Laub and Sampson 2003). Hence, at least some life-course transitions appear to be significant factors in the process of desisting from crime for a large number of people.

Despite the strong empirical associations between several life-course transitions and desistance from crime, a number of important theoretical issues need to be resolved before researchers can claim to understand the role that these events play in the development of criminal and delinquent behavior. First, there is considerable theoretical ambiguity about how to interpret the empirical relationships between events such as marriage, employment, or military service and crime. At best, scholars can rattle off lists of possible reasons why these events might promote changes in criminal behavior, but in the absence of more rigorous empirical evaluations of these theories they cannot state for certain whether any or all of these explanations apply across the population of desisting offenders. Second, there are some notable differences in the apparent effects of key life-course transitions on desistance, but most theoretical explanations for the associations between life-course transitions and crime are not able to account for these differences. Third, as the in-depth study of individual lives indicates, the ability of events such as marriage, employment, or military service to promote genuine and lasting changes in criminal conduct varies across the population, yet the sources of these variations have begun to be explored only recently. As things currently stand, the reasons why the same

role transition can lead to desistance among one offender, while having little or no effect on another, are the subject of conjecture.

### **Why Do Life-Course Transitions Affect Desistance?**

The empirical relationships between events such as marriage, employment, military service and crime have been claimed to support explanations of desistance based on a number of established theories of crime causation, including rational-choice, social control, and social learning theory (Cusson and Pissoneault 1985; Sampson and Laub 1993; Laub and Sampson 2003; Warr 1998). Proponents of the control perspective contend that these transitions combine elements of interpersonal attachment and commitment to conventional goals and that their effects on crime are due to their effects on these processes of socialization (Laub and Sampson 2003, Sampson and Laub 1993). At the same time, these events can limit criminal involvement by reducing opportunities for crime or access to criminal associates (Osgood and Lee 1993, Warr 1998) or enhancing direct supervision over the individual offender (Laub and Sampson 2003).

Although these are the most commonly cited explanations for why life-course transitions can help deflect an offender away from crime, other perspectives, developed primarily to account for change or stability in criminal behavior, are sometimes used to explain the links between delinquency and the occurrence of transformative life events. These include the theory of cognitive transformation which contends that life-course transitions encourage desistance by facilitating shifts in the attitudes, values, and personal identities of desisting offenders (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002).

Irrespective of which theories seem most plausible, the main problem for desistance research is that only rarely have these theories been evaluated empirically in a manner that could exclude rival hypotheses or ascertain their applicability across the population. Those studies that have attempted to exclude rival explanations have been limited in the number of theories they could examine or the number of life-course transitions they could investigate (e.g. Maume, Ousey, and Beaver 2005). As a result, little is really known, as opposed to postulated, about why life-course transitions are so important to the process of moving away from crime.

In fairness, ambiguity over how to interpret the links between transformative life changes and desistance from crime has resulted, in part, from the predominance in criminology of theoretical controversies over the likelihood that individuals can change (e.g. Laub and Sampson 2003; Hirschi and Gottfredson 1995; Sampson and Laub 1995). Instead of testing different theoretical explanations for why various life-course transitions affect criminal involvement, the scholars most interested in the crime-suppressing benefits of key life-course transitions have been preoccupied by the need to demonstrate to their more skeptical colleagues that such effects are real and not imagined (e.g. Laub and Sampson 2003). Too frequently, this has been achieved by subsuming diverse perspectives into a single theoretical viewpoint. For example, Laub and Sampson (2003) argue that the distinct processes that link changes such as marriage, employment, or military service to criminal involvement are, to a large extent, different manifestations of informal social control. At the same time, they also contend that these events can affect criminal involvement through other means by reducing the amount of time that people spend in the company of criminal acquaintances or by affecting major psychological changes including shifts in self-perception (Laub and Sampson 2003).

Even if there are benefits to integrating theories in this way (Bernard and Snipes 1996), one of the major drawbacks of trying to do so is that it impedes theoretical falsification (Hirschi 1979). If theoretical integration occurs merely by combining risk and protective factors that might be causally related to crime in a multitude of ways, as appears to have been the case in prior research on the links between life-course transitions and crime, then it may occur at the expense of developing a real understanding of the processes that underpin desistance from crime. It is hard to imagine how anyone can claim to understand the desistance process if they do not know which of the numerous individual and social changes that can accompany marriage, employment or military service are most critical to fostering desistance from crime.

### **Which Life-Course Transitions Promote Desistance?**

As an explanation for desistance, the “age-graded” version of social control theory implies that anything that helps attach a person to conventional society and



increase his or her commitment to mainstream goals can reduce his or her criminal motivation (Sampson and Laub 1993; Laub and Sampson 2003). In similar respects, any role change that leads to more supervision or direct control of the individual should also promote desistance by reducing his or her opportunities to commit crime. By contrast, the changes that matter most from the perspective of social learning theory are those changes that alter the company that people keep or the rewards and punishments derived from crime (Warr 1993, 1998). The key to explaining the effects of life-course transitions is to know how these events affect the proximate causes of crime.

By implication, life-course transitions that appear to affect the causes of crime in analogous ways should have reasonably similar effects on desistance. Multiple studies suggest, however, that seemingly analogous transitions do not affect criminal and delinquent behavior in consistent and predictable ways. For example, even though the associations between marriage and crime have been demonstrated in a plethora of studies (Meisenhelder 1977; Gibbens 1984; Sampson and Laub 1993; Farrington and West 1995; Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995; Laub and Sampson 2003; Sampson, Laub and Wimer 2006; King, Massoglia, and MacMillan 2007), the evidence that cohabitation also engenders desistance is decidedly mixed (Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995; Warr 1998; Sampson, Laub and Wimer 2006). In fact, some studies have even observed that cohabitation is positively related to criminal and delinquent involvement (Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995; Warr 1998). Research concerning the links between parenthood and desistance could be described in very similar terms (Farrington and West 1995; Hughes 1998; Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph 2002). Even so, the reasons why ostensibly comparable life-course transitions should have such divergent effects on criminal behavior have not been fully investigated.

Explaining these differences is an important step towards clarifying the role of life-course transitions in the desistance process. In broad terms, there are two possible explanations for why some life-course transitions may be more likely to affect desistance than others. First, it may be that seemingly analogous events are not as similar as they appear. In that case, of course, identifying the ways in which they truly differ may help identify why some life-course transitions are more likely than others to foster successful transitions away from crime. Second, it is possible that similarities between the effects of

these different life-course transitions are obscured by variations in their effects across the population. For example, it is possible that parenthood affects crime by men and women in distinct ways. Life-history narratives of female offenders often reveal the transformative effects of motherhood, but fatherhood rarely emerges in such studies as an important reason for desistance among men (Shover 1983; 1996; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; but see Hughes 1998). Since more men commit offences than women, the potentially positive impact of motherhood on desistance among female offenders may be overshadowed by the null effect of fatherhood on crimes committed by men.

In that sense, failure to illuminate relationships between these states and crime does not mean that such relationships do not exist; indeed, it is not surprising that researchers have not found equivalent relationships between parenthood, cohabitation, and crime if one considers that virtually every study that has examined these relationships has ignored the tremendous variation that exists in both types relationships. In much the same way as the positive benefits of marriage are confined to those for whom marriage heralds genuine changes in lifestyle and thinking, the benefits of non-marital cohabitation or parenthood might accrue only to those who make emotional commitments to their partners and children. As I argue in Chapter 4, this may be an especially relevant consideration when examining the effects of cohabitation on crime. Thus, researchers need to be attentive to the possibility that contingencies in the effects of life-course transitions may deflect attention from the benefits of other transformative experiences.

### **The Limits of Life-Course Transitions**

It is important not to overstate the role that life-course transitions play as the harbingers of desistance. Many former delinquents have abandoned crime even in the absence of these transitions, as indicated by the life-histories of numerous desisting offenders (Shover 1983, 1986; Leibrich 1997; Maruna 2001; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002). Even though large-scale quantitative studies indicate that finding a job, getting married, or joining the military increases the likelihood that an individual should give up crime, these events clearly are not the only paths to desistance. If an understanding of the links between life-course transitions and changes in criminal

behavior is likely to contribute to the development of a theory of criminal desistance, it is imperative that researchers can reconcile their explanations for the effects of these changes with the ability of offenders to desist from crime even in their absence.

The more pressing issue, however, is for researchers to account for the reasons why some offenders who experience these events continue to commit crime. Even if their stories are lost sometimes in large-scale quantitative studies, detailed case studies based on the life-history narratives of offenders often reveal examples of individuals who experience events such as marriage, employment, and military service, but do not undergo significant changes in their rates of offending or in the likelihood that they will commit crime (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; Laub and Sampson 2003). Even for the lay observer, spousal violence is an obvious exception to the claim that marriage helps offenders abandon crime, just as occupational theft is an example of the limits of employment as a contributor to criminal desistance. For some offenders, these life-course transitions might be associated with initial attempts to abandon crime that merely dissipate over time as the challenges of sustaining a conventional lifestyle intensify. For countless others, however, it is clear that these events have little or no impact on their desire or their ability to change.

These exceptions may be too infrequent to contradict the rule, but they do imply that “one cannot simply extrapolate that involvement in tightly-knit families or paid-employment produces the kinds of social capital that reduces offending” (Gadd and Farrall 2004, p. 141). Desistance research requires a far more nuanced explanation of the role that life-course transitions play in the desistance process. The effects of life-course transitions vary dramatically across the population and the task of explaining these variations is an important step towards clarifying the links between these transitions and behavioral change.

Researchers have already begun to note some of these sources of variation. For example, even the most optimistic observers of the links between marriage and crime acknowledge that it is not the act of matrimony that helps divert offenders from their lives of crime, but the nature of the marital relationship (Laub et al 1998, Laub and Sampson 2003). In fact, “marriage alone may even increase crime” if the marriage is not successful (Laub et al 1998, p. 234). In similar respects, stable, full-time employment is

often associated with reductions in offending, but working in a series of short-term, transient jobs appears to have no such benefit (Laub and Sampson 2003). But these types of contingencies tell only part of the story. Precisely, why some individuals are able to maintain steady jobs or develop stable, prosperous, and ultimately crime-stopping marriages, while others do not, remains an intriguing mystery.

On one hand, differences in the effects of these events could reflect differences in the causes of criminal behavior across the population (Moffit 1993; Blokland and Nieuwbeerta 2005). There is a strong tradition in criminology of typological models of criminal behavior that argue that individual-differences in the developmental course of offending behavior are related to differences in the etiology of antisocial behavior (e.g. Loeber and LeBlanc 1990; Moffit 1993; Patterson and Yoerger 1993). Depending on the theoretical basis for the links between life-course transitions and desistance, these classifications could also correspond to important variations in the relationship between marriage, employment, or military service and crime.

On the other hand, differences in the effects of life events might be due to differences in the meanings that people ascribe to the transformations that punctuate their lives. As Laub and Sampson (2003) note, the men in their study were active participants in their own lives and the choices they made helped determine how their lives progressed; indeed, “adaptation to life events is crucial because the same event or transition followed by different adaptations can lead to different trajectories” (Laub and Sampson 2003). In short, choice and the occurrence of life-events interact and the ways that they interact have important implications for desistance from crime.

Unraveling the differential impacts of internal and external forces presents a formidable theoretical and methodological challenge. Even sophisticated studies that control for the effects of unobserved, individual-traits have failed to take account of the plethora of unobserved, dynamic factors that are subsumed by terms such as human agency or personal choice. There are some who argue that, given the difficulty involved in making sense of human agency, “an understanding of how and why some of these transitions fostered desistance — while others sparked more persistent or different forms of offending — is a matter that can only be resolved through engagement with the specifics of the cases” (Gadd and Farrall 2004, p. 141). In short, they argue that

researchers need to abandon the goal of making broad generalizations about the effects of life-course transitions on crime and focus, instead, on in-depth studies of individual lives.

The alternative is to acknowledge the possibility that the apparent chaos and variability of individual lives may be explained by some underlying, albeit currently unobserved, order. The rising popularity of the complexity sciences in the social sciences is premised on the recognition that the seeming unpredictability of life may reflect the paucity of contemporary theories and methods more than the sheer randomness of human existence (Kiel and Elliot 1996). Even though personal choice or human agency are likely to play a significant role in moderating the effects of life-course transitions on crime, initially, a more modest and realistic approach to understanding the limits of life-course transitions is to start with some concrete predictions regarding possible variations in their effects. At the very least, the impact of key life experiences might depend on observable differences between individuals, especially with respect to differences that are known already to be consequential to the study of crime, such as age, sex, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. In so far as these characteristics might reflect broad differences in the meaning of events, the likelihood of their occurrence, or their links to the causes of crime, they may be significant sources of variation in desistance.

### **The Current Study**

The purpose of this dissertation is to answer these three questions by focusing on one specific type of life-course transition — the establishment of adult family relationships. Specifically, I examine two life-course transitions related to the development of families in adulthood — cohabitation and marriage — and investigate: first, the extent to which both types of relationships can contribute to desistance; second, the theoretical mechanisms through which cohabitation and marriage are most likely to promote behavioral change; and third, the degree to which these relationships foster desistance for both men and women. In doing so, I aim to contribute to a more refined understanding of how adult life-course transitions affect the desistance process.

Family environments are among the major foci of some of the most prominent theories of crime causation (Hirschi 1969, Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990, Agnew 1992)

and the empirical links between crime and family characteristics have been demonstrated in a plethora of studies (e.g. Nye 1958; McCord and McCord 1959; Glueck and Glueck 1968; Hirschi 1969; Cernkovich and Giordano 1987; Sampson and Laub 1993). Even so, the majority of this research has concentrated on the causes of childhood and adolescent antisocial behavior (Sampson and Laub 1993). Examining the effects of these relationships on criminal behavior in adulthood may help provide a more complete understanding of the links between crime and a major social institution.

Those studies that have examined the influence of families on the behavior of adult offenders have found important links between some adult family relationships and desistance from crime (Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995; Sampson and Laub 1993; Laub and Sampson 2003; Warr 1998). As noted previously, these studies have shown with considerable consistency that marital relationships, for instance, help restrain crime in adulthood even among individuals with extensive criminal histories (Meisenhelder 1977; Farrington and West 1995, Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995; Sampson and Laub 1993, Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998, Laub and Sampson 2003, Warr 1998).

Even so, the study of adult family relationships and their effects on desistance suffers from the same problems that undermine research on the links between other life-course transitions and crime. First, researchers are not able to fully explain why adult family relationships affect criminal behavior. Second, those theories that have been used to explain the links between marriage and desistance have provided only limited insights into the reasons why analogous relationships, such as parenthood or cohabitation, do not affect crime in the same manner. Third, far too little is known about the limits of adult family formation as a cause of desistance from crime. Does the impact of marriage vary across the population? If so, why are some marriages more likely than others to steer partners away from crime? In similar respects, researchers know very little about possible variability in the effects of similar family relationships such as cohabitation. Do the effects of cohabitation also vary? If so, how can we explain differences in their effects?

The answers to these questions are fundamental to the development of a more detailed understanding of the ways in which family factors are related to criminal behavior in adulthood. To that end, the dissertation proceeds in two parts. In Part One, I look at cohabitation and marriage and consider their impacts on self-reported criminal

and delinquent behavior. The major purpose of this section is to provide a theoretical clarification of the links between the cohabitation, marriage, and desistance from crime. In Part Two, I look at the extent to which the effects of these two types of adult family relationships on desistance are contingent on sex.

Sex is the most important correlate of involvement in crime. It has been alleged that everywhere, in all times and places, men are more likely to commit crime than women (Steffensmeir 1996; Steffensmeier and Allan 2000). Despite its importance, however, the association between sex and crime remains a relatively under-explored area of research. In countless studies, even in the field of desistance research, sex is treated as just another risk or protective factor to be controlled in additive models of crime or is excluded altogether from consideration (e.g. Sampson and Laub 1993; Warr 1998; Laub and Sampson 2003). As a result, these studies are frequently criticized for being unable to explain criminal and delinquent behavior among women. In reaction to these allegedly “androcentric” accounts of crime, a number of scholars contend that the onset, escalation, persistence, and desistance of female offending require their own explanations (e.g. Daly and Chesney-Lind 1988). As a result, there is a growing body of research that examines the distinct pathways that girls and women follow into crime, and to a lesser extent, away from it (Chesney-Lind and Sheldon 1998; Uggen and Kruttschnitt 1998; Sommers, Baskin, and Fagan 1994; Holtfreter, Reisig, and Morash 2004).

This research agenda has highlighted a number of key transformative experiences that affect involvement in crime among women, including sexual victimization in childhood and adolescence, in addition to several life-course transitions that lead to reductions in criminal and delinquent behavior among women. Since a number of these events appear to influence crime and desistance exclusively among women, these studies have been cited as evidence of the need for specifically female theories of crime and criminal desistance (Chesney-Lind and Sheldon 1998).

Useful as this research agenda has been, its emphasis on theoretical innovation presupposes that the mechanisms that facilitate and discourage crime among men and women are so different that they cannot be explained by existing theories of human behavior. This research has not yet demonstrated satisfactorily that the underlying causal process — as distinct from the events that instigate it — are so different that they cannot

be explained by existing criminological theories. Whether men and women follow different pathways into and out of crime and the degree to which these pathways are distinct is an empirical question, but the issue of whether such differences are so great as to require fundamentally different theoretical propositions is also a theoretical one. Even if the transformative experiences that trigger the termination of offending are distinct for men and women, similarities in the underlying processes that explain the effects of these transitions implies the need for a gendered, rather than gender-specific, theory of desistance (Steffensmeier 1996; Steffensmeier and Allan 2000).

It is important, therefore, to distinguish gender differences in the effects of life-course transitions from differences in the process or processes that underpin desistance from crime. Men and women may encounter divergent experiences in their lives and the meanings and opportunities afforded by these events may vary significantly across the two sexes. That is not to say, however, that the pathways out of crime are vastly different for men and women. If men and women benefit from different types of relationships, but essentially for the same reason — for instance, if they become attached to conventional others and in doing so become more cognizant of the costs of continued involvement in crime — then there is little reason to claim that different processes govern their behavior.

### **The Outline of the Dissertation**

In Chapter 2, I begin the process of investigating these issues by discussing the meaning of desistance and the implications of its definition for understanding changes in criminal involvement. I then summarize the major theoretical perspectives that have been used to explain desistance from crime. These are: first, theories that explain desistance as a natural development process; second, typological differences between offenders and heterogeneity in the causes of desistance; third, theories that emphasize changes in social control; fourth, theories that emphasize changes in the perceived costs and benefits of crime as the catalyst for disengagement; fifth, theories that attribute desistance to changes in the opportunities to learn crime; and sixth, those that explain desistance as a function of a series of important cognitive and perceptual transformations. In describing these



perspectives, special consideration is given to the role that each ascribes to life-course transitions in promoting desistance from crime.

Chapter 3 extends these discussions to consider some of the methodological issues surrounding the empirical study of desistance and its relationship to life-course transitions such as cohabitation and marriage. In particular, I describe the two approaches used in this dissertation to measure desistance and identify its principal correlates. I then describe briefly the key features of the National Youth Survey (NYS) — the data used to answer the three research questions — and the way those data are used to measure crime, cohabitation, and marriage. I end the Chapter by considering an issue that has hampered and continues to hamper our efforts to study the desistance process and the impact of key life-course transitions on crime and delinquency — the problem of self-selection.

The major contribution of this dissertation to research on desistance from crime is outlined in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, which consist of three empirical studies examining the links between cohabitation, marriage and crime in detail. In Chapter 4, I start by investigating the empirical relationships between marriage, cohabitation, and criminal behavior. As noted already, although the empirical links between marriage and desistance are well known, the evidence that cohabiting relationships can also facilitate changes in criminal behavior is less conclusive (Sampson and Laub 1993, Farrington and West 1995, Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995, Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998, Laub and Sampson 2003, Sampson, Laub, and Wimer 2006). Hence, in Chapter 4, I ask whether cohabitation, in the absence of marriage, promotes desistance from crime and if so, if it does so as effectively as marriage. A key concern, evaluated in Chapter 4, is whether the effects of cohabitation and marriage are contingent on the strength of the relationship.

In Chapter 5, I aim to further clarify these relationships in theoretical terms. I test three of the most prominent explanations for the links between marriage and desistance derived from three of the six theories of desistance, outlined in Chapter 2. These are the age-graded theory of social control, social learning theory, and the theory of cognitive transformation. The theoretical mechanisms implied by each theory are explored, to the degree that available data permit, and then tested against one another in a manner that seeks to identify which processes are most relevant to understanding why marriage promotes desistance from crime.

Chapter 6 explores at least one of the factors that might condition the impact of marriage and cohabitation on crime by focusing on sex differences in their effects. As mentioned earlier, a key theoretical concern in criminology and in the study of desistance, in particular, is the extent to which men and women follow distinctive pathways into and out of crime. Thus, even though age, ethnicity, and socio-economic status are important correlates of crime and delinquency (Steffensmeier and Allan 2000; Walker, Spohn, and Delone 2004; Harris and Shaw 2000), their roles in conditioning the effects of cohabitation and marriage on desistance are beyond the scope of this dissertation. As noted also, an important challenge facing such research is the need to rule out the possibility that sex differences in the effects of adult family relationships are due solely to differences in the baseline rates of offending or sex differences in the likelihood of experiencing these events. Excluding these rival explanations, however, is also beyond the scope of this dissertation. Thus, Chapter 6 is intended to provide a preliminary evaluation of one potential source of demographic variation in the effects of marriage and cohabitation on desistance from crime.

In Chapter 7, I review the major findings of the study and consider some of their implications, with particular focus on the policy implications of these results. Despite the contributions that this dissertation makes to the literature on desistance, some important issues that are beyond the scope of the project remain unresolved. Thus, in this final Chapter, some consideration is given to avenues for future research.

## CHAPTER 2

In this chapter, I review the meaning of desistance, as the term is commonly used in the literature, and consider some of the conceptual problems that different definitional approaches pose for our understanding of desistance from crime. I then outline the meaning of the term as it is used throughout this dissertation; that is, a process that results in abstinence from crime among individuals who had previously engaged in crime, for the maximum period of time for which criminal and non-criminal behavior can be observed. In this chapter, I also review a number of theoretical models that have been used to explain how and why people disengage from crime focusing on explanations provided by six distinct theoretical frameworks: aging and maturation; developmental and typological theories; social control theory; rational-choice theory; social learning theory; and the theory of cognitive transformations.

### **The Definition of Desistance**

Despite considerable scholarly interest in the ways in which people disengage from crime, research into desistance from crime is hampered by lack of agreement regarding the meaning of the term (Bushway et al 2001, Laub and Sampson 2001; Maruna 2001; Mulvey et al 2004; Maruna and Farrall 2004; Bottoms et al 2004). To some extent, this lack of definitional agreement has resulted from the tendency of researchers to avoid defining the term altogether, thereby, substituting implicitly the measurement of the concept for its definition. For example, in failing to define desistance, Warr (1998) left readers to assume that it equated to his measure of the concept; namely, having smoked marijuana in the year preceding a survey interview, but having abstained from marijuana use in the year preceding a subsequent interview (see also Maume, Ousey, and Beaver 2005). It goes without saying that the definitions and indicators of concepts should converge as much as possible. However, if concepts are defined according to the measures that are most readily available for them, then their meanings become random and imprecise, thereby limiting the ability of other researchers to replicate and extend the results of prior studies. Moreover, in avoiding the problem of

definitions, researchers risk conflating the meaning of their concepts with factors that influence the accuracy of the measures of those concepts.

In any case, definitional ambiguity surrounding the term appears to have persisted despite deliberate attempts to define the term and standardize its meaning and measurement (e.g. Bushway et al 2001, Maruna 2001). Indeed, as articles continue to appear advocating the use of new or innovative definitions of the concept (e.g. Maruna and Farrall 2004; Bottoms et al 2004), it would seem that scholarly efforts to take the definition of desistance more seriously have only exacerbated the confusion surrounding the term. Most commentators agree that, at its simplest level, desistance relates in some way to the termination or cessation of offending. The major point of contention, however, concerns the nature of that relationship; specifically, whether desistance is the same thing as termination or whether it refers to a process that ends in the termination of offending. These debates may seem trivial, on the surface, but they have important ramifications for the measurement of desistance and, as a consequence, the ability of researchers to contribute to a deeper understanding of how and why people disengage from crime. Indeed, different definitions of desistance can lead to differences in which individuals are classified as either desisting or having desisted from crime (Bushway et al 2003; Bushway, Paternoster, and Brame 2003).

### **Desistance as Termination**

Desistance is often defined as the termination of criminal offending. For example, Shover (1996, p. 121) defined it as the “voluntary termination of serious criminal participation” and Farrall and Bowling (1999) described it as “the moment that a criminal career ends”. In most cases, studies such as these have measured desistance as the absence of offending over a specified period among those people who had engaged previously in crime. Thus, an offender who had desisted from crime was one who, despite some earlier involvement, had remained free from crime over time. This definition of desistance, as termination, is consistent with the basic meaning of the term as ceasing or stopping criminal behavior, but its usefulness for criminological research is limited in two important respects.

First, the definition more or less assumes that offenders are continuously involved in crime, but abruptly cease to commit crime thereafter. Most research suggests, however, that criminal behavior is sporadic (Luckenbill and Best 1981) and those who engage in it tend to “drift” (Matza 1964) or “zig-zag” (Glaser 1964) in and out of crime. In effect, this means that termination may occur on an annual, monthly, weekly, or even daily basis (Maruna 2001, p. 23). However, desistance carries with it some notion of maintenance: to desist is to stop doing something and to refrain from doing it again. By defining desistance as termination, therefore, researchers may be capturing an interruption in offending rather than its actual end.

Second, the definition of desistance as cessation naturally focuses attention on the points at which changes in criminal behavior are first manifested. As Maruna (2001, p. 26) notes, “if a watch stops ticking ... we look for new things that happen at about the same time as the termination event that could be responsible for the change”. Despite its emphasis on the moment of change, however, this approach offers little insight into how best to measure the termination moment. One could focus on the decision to abandon crime (or the “moment of clarity” described by many desisting offenders as the moments in which they realized that they needed to change their behavior), but this presupposes that all offenders have such experiences. There is considerable evidence in qualitative studies of desistance to indicate that many offenders experience “desistance by default” (Laub and Sampson 2003, see also Shover 1983, 1985); that is, they abandon crime without ever intending to do so. Moreover, even among those who describe their desistance from crime as being precipitated by epiphanies, moments of clarity or “bottoming out” experiences, there is considerable evidence that initial attempts at desistance are often unsuccessful (Maruna 1997). For many offenders, most of the work involved in desisting from crime involves the maintenance of non-offending. Hence, the factors that are most important to an understanding of desistance may be the factors that enable desisting offenders to remain steadfast in their efforts to abandon crime.

## **Desistance as a Process Ending in Termination**

The alternative to defining desistance as the termination of offending is to define it as a developmental process that results in termination and continued abstinence from crime. To that end, Laub and Sampson (2001, p. 11) define desistance as “the causal process that supports the termination of offending”. In similar respects, Maruna (2001, p. 26) agrees that the definition needs to reflect the fact that desistance is ongoing (although he rejects the idea of defining desistance as a causal process). Thus, Maruna (2001, p.26) defines it “as the long-term abstinence from crime among individuals who had previously engaged in persistent offending”. The common theme in both of these definitions is that desistance encompasses both a change in offending (i.e. moving from a state of offending to a state of non-offending) and continuity in non-offending (i.e. maintaining the state of abstinence from crime). This approach avoids some of the problems inherent in static definitions of desistance that focus on termination as an event, but it raises two other complications that need to be addressed. First, it introduces the need for researchers to define the beginning and end of desistance. Second, in order to study the process before it leads an offender to abandon crime, researchers may need to identify alternative manifestations of the desistance process other than the termination of crime.

A dynamic definition of desistance implies that the process may begin even before the last offence has been committed. Thus, as in the popular scenario of a thief who plans one last score before quitting his life of crime or in the more realistic scenario of the ex-convict who decides to abandon crime but slips back into the life when faced with the strains and boredom of a conventional life, the desistance process may encapsulate periods of offending (Bottoms et al 2004). More importantly, the definition of desistance as a process implies that desistance never ends; that is, since crime is sporadic and many desisting offenders experience relapses, desistance may not end until an offender dies (Maruna 2001; Bottoms et al 2004). This indeterminacy of desistance implies that, at any point in the life-course, an ex-offender who has not committed an offense for several years might still be regarded as desisting from crime.

The concept of desistance as an interminable process has much in common with the language used by participants in twelve-step addiction recovery programs when they describe themselves as alcoholics or addicts, even years after they have last had a drink or

used other drugs. It also may reflect, more accurately, the way that offenders view their own transitions away from crime. As Maruna (2001) notes, even though offenders do not use words like desistance, they do talk about “going straight” or “making good” — expressions that imply a developmental process without any clear end in sight. Hence, desistance, notes Maruna (2001, p. 26), has “no end state where one can be; rather, it is a perpetual process of arrival”.

In part, the willingness to see desistance as an indeterminate process may be due to an over-reliance on the model of desistance from legal and illegal drug use in desistance research. Giving up crime and giving up drugs may share some important similarities and the two may even be linked causally (Laub and Sampson 2001, Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph 2001, Laub and Sampson 2003, Sommers, Baskin and Fagan 1994), but similarities in the processes of desistance from seemingly analogous behaviors do not imply that the model of the perpetually recovering alcoholic or addict is an appropriate model with which to understand desistance from crime. Even if criminal behavior is habitual, it certainly is not addictive. Although desisting offenders may face enormous challenges in their efforts to live within the law, in the absence of a strong physiological compulsion to commit crime, it seems unreasonable to portray the desisting offender as a person who is constantly and perpetually at risk or relapse. That is not to say that people do not falter or that relapses do not occur. However, the prevalence and frequency of these relapses is hardly sufficient to warrant the image of the desisting offender as an individual constantly at risk of criminal recidivism.

The idea that desistance has “no end state” is clearly at odds with the results of criminological research showing that the overwhelming majority of people who become involved in crime actually stop committing crime at some point and cease to commit offences ever again (Hirschi and Gottfredson 1983, Laub and Sampson 2003). Even among those who were heavily embroiled in a criminal lifestyle at one or more stages of their lives, the probability of committing another offence at some later stage will be so low that at some point it seems completely nonsensical to talk about desistance as an ongoing process. For all intents and purposes, for these people, the seductions of crime have faded so much in the distant recesses of memory that the idea of ever committing another offense seems unimaginable. Indeed, even those formerly wayward individuals

who appear most nostalgic about the lives that they left behind, and ambivalent about their change, hardly intimate a strong desire to return to their old ways. As one such man remarked to Laub and Sampson (2003, p. 147), “There’s many times I wanted to go back ... But we can’t do that. We’re hoping to go to Disney next March”. In these and other related cases, surely researchers should be able to talk about the process of going straight as something that can reasonably, if not definitively, come to an end.

All this implies, to some extent, that the definition of desistance should in some way take account of criminal propensity or some other concept that can predict the likelihood that an individual will be involved in crime. Hence, some researchers prefer to define desistance as “the process by which criminality, defined as the propensity to offend, changes with age” and declines to a negligible level (Bushway et al 2003, p. 494), but without identifying additional sources of information that can predict the commencement of some metamorphosing process it is difficult to see how this approach moves beyond the basic problem that plagues all desistance research; that is, how to make inferences about the progress of behavioral change by observing (or not observing) the outcome of that process. Moreover, as some critics have pointed out, it is difficult to envisage how this approach could be adapted to the study of desistance using qualitative research methods (Laub and Sampson 2001).

A more practicable solution to this problem is to define desistance less ambitiously in a manner that specifies desistance over periods of time. Thus, desistance can be defined as the abstinence from crime, for the maximum period of time for which criminal and non-criminal behavior can be observed or even over a number of years, among individuals who had previously engaged in it. In that sense, people can only be classified as desisting offenders up to a specified point in time; that is, if she or he has avoided crime for the period of time over which their behavior has been monitored. Of course, this approach may lead researchers to classify some individuals as having desisted even though they may re-offend at a later stage. In reality, however, the desistance process is truncated anytime that researchers attempt to measure it. All desistance studies are sensitive to the length of follow-up, therefore, and all studies run the risk of misclassifying some individuals (Eggleston, Laub, Sampson 2004; Nagin and Tremblay 2005). The main difference implied by the definition of desistance, that I



propose, is that it acknowledges the variable length of the desistance process. In doing so, a definition of desistance that is focused on crime-free periods is likely to shift attention from the study of the abandonment of crime for life (which rarely can be studied anyway) to studying the avoidance of crime at specific stages of life. In time, research adopting this approach may even reveal that different factors account for differences in the length of time for which desisting offenders manage to avoid crime.

If desistance is a dynamic process that results in the termination of offending then it is also likely that the desistance process begins well before the termination of offending. This, of course, presents researchers interested in studying the process as it develops with a considerable challenge. If desistance begins before the individual abandons crime, how can the desistance process be observed? What kinds of changes might be considered the harbingers of desistance? Laub and Sampson (2003) attempt to avoid this problem by defining desistance as the causal process resulting in the termination of crime. Hence, they approach the study of desistance by trying to identify factors that are associated with termination, thereby eliminating the need to observe a process that culminates in change. Although this appears to shift the focus of attention away from the end result of the desistance process, in practice it amounts to little more than identifying the factors that are predictive of changes in criminal behavior.

Others have tried to study alternative manifestations of the desistance process by identifying stages that offenders are thought to encounter as they move away from crime. For example, a number of researchers have concentrated on trying to explain the decision to give up crime (e.g. Cusson and Pinsonneault 1985). Although these studies have helped advance our understanding of how offenders disengage from crime, without a clear appreciation of how the decision to quit relates to the overall process of abandoning crime, which presumably requires a definition of desistance, it is difficult to know exactly what their contribution has been. In simple terms, if desistance is the equivalent of deciding to abandon a life of crime then presumably the contribution of these studies to our understanding of desistance has been quite considerable. However, if there is more to desistance than the decision to quit, then researchers still have plenty more work ahead of them. Precisely how much more work is required depends on how much more there is to desistance than the initial decision to abandon crime.

In similar respects, Maruna and Farrall (2004) have proposed that researchers distinguish between primary desistance and secondary desistance. Whereas primary desistance represents changes in actual behavior, secondary desistance refers to behavioral changes that are accompanied by fundamental changes in personal identity and, in particular, the assumption of a non-deviant identity (Maruna and Farrall 2004). The problem with this approach is that it assumes that all offenders follow a common process as they disengage from crime. Although it may be useful to look for potential harbingers of desistance along the way, other than the absence of offending researchers do not really know what other changes are relevant. Such things as deciding to avoid crime in the future or merely reducing the volume or types of offenses committed could be important supplementary indications that desistance is underway, but these changes should not replace abstinence from crime as the key indication of desistance. Although there may be no solution to this problem, it implies that without an understanding of what the desistance process looks like, at least in the majority of cases, it may be impossible for researchers to really study desistance as anything other than the absence of offending.

Irrespective of whether desistance is defined as the termination of offending or as an ongoing process that results in cessation, most researchers appear to agree that the term is only useful if applied to individuals who engaged in some form of persistent offending. This means, more broadly, that desistance “cannot be meaningfully studied independent of a conception of crime and the offender” (Laub and Sampson 2001, p. 10). Thus, Maruna (2001, p. 26) defines desistance as “the long-term abstinence from crime among individuals who had previously engaged in persistent patterns of criminal behavior”. Laub and Sampson (2003, p. 22) are even more explicit, stating that “termination and desistance should be studied among those who reach some reasonable threshold of frequent and serious offending”. This approach, however, begs the question: how much offending and over what period of time might constitute either “persistent patterns of criminal behavior” or a “reasonable threshold”?

Understandable as this position may be, there are two important problems with it. First, in suggesting that little can be gained by studying the termination of offending among low-level, adolescent offenders, researchers such as Laub and Sampson (2003) seem to be implying that the causal process that underpins desistance is different for

different types of offenders. Such a position is sharply at odds with their general theoretical model, however, known as the age-graded theory of social control, which emphasizes that the causes of persistence in and desistance from crime are the same for all offenders irrespective of their prior patterns or levels of criminal behavior. Of course, the causes of desistance for low-level and high-level offending may differ, but that is not to say that researchers should assume from the outset that such differences exist. Second, the above argument is also neglectful of the fact that most people who have engaged in crime at some point in their lives did so at very low levels during adolescence. In similar respects, most people who abandon crime will do so in that same period, disengaging from what might be described as low-level and non-serious criminal careers. Surely, a complete understanding of desistance also requires that their desistance be explained.

### **Towards a Definition of Desistance**

The overall point, therefore, is that when it comes to studying desistance no definitional approach is perfect. Perhaps the most defensible solution is to treat desistance as an “essentially contestable concept” (Gallie 1964); that is, accept that no standardized meaning of the concept exists (or is likely to exist) and merely define the concept precisely as it seems best to use it being sure to note the limitations and implications of such usage. For the purposes of this dissertation, therefore, desistance is defined as a developmental process that results in the cessation of and abstinence from offending over specified periods of time among individuals who have previously been involved in crime.

This developmental process may manifest itself in a variety of ways including reductions in the volume or diversity of offending (especially if specialization is associated with a decline in the overall seriousness of the offenses committed). Of course, the defining characteristic of desistance is behavioral change. Hence, researchers interested in understanding the desistance process should be interested above all in explaining within-individual changes in offending, especially when such change constitutes the abandonment of crime by individuals with a history of misconduct. At the same time, the definition of desistance as a developmental process recognizes the importance of continuity of conventional behavior. As a result, factors that can account

for between-individual differences in crime are important, particularly as they relate to enduring differences between active offenders and non-offenders who had previously been involved in crime. It is important to note, however, that the only reliable hallmark of desistance is the existence of extended periods of time during which individuals who had previously been involved in crime refrain from committing it.

### **Theoretical Approaches to Explaining Desistance**

Despite lack of agreement about the meaning of desistance, as noted in Chapter 1, a number of theoretical perspectives have been used to explain the abandonment of criminal and delinquent behavior. This research literature can be summarized and broadly categorized into six different theoretical frameworks. These are: first, theories that explain desistance as a natural development process; second, typological differences between offenders and heterogeneity in the causes of desistance; third, theories that emphasize changes in social control; fourth, theories that emphasize changes in the perceived costs and benefits of crime as the catalyst for disengagement; fifth, theories that attribute desistance to changes in the opportunities to learn crime; and sixth, those that explain desistance as a function of a series of important cognitive and perceptual transformations. In similar respects to traditional criminological theories, these desistance accounts often acknowledge the same factors as important facilitators of behavioral change. They differ, however, in terms of the causal processes that are thought to link those factors to human behavior.

### **Desistance as Natural Development**

Given the robustness of the relationship between age and crime, it is not surprising that aging should feature prominently in many explanations of criminal desistance. One of the first studies to have adopted this approach was conducted by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck (1950, 1974). They argued that desistance resulted from a process of maturation, which they defined as “the development of a stage of physical,

intellectual, and affective capacity and stability, and a sufficient degree of integration of all major constituents of temperament, personality, and intelligence, to be adequate to the demands and restrictions of life in organized society” (Glueck and Glueck 1974, p. 170). For these authors, physical, intellectual and emotional maturation was not synonymous with aging; that is, maturity is not reached automatically with the passage of years. Those individuals who engaged in persistent offending did so because they lacked maturity whereas those who desisted from committing crime were believed to have achieved sufficient emotional and intellectual development. Nonetheless, in as much as recidivism rates declined with age, Glueck and Glueck (1950) suggested that for most people involved in crime and delinquency, desistance reflected normal development. Despite the acknowledgement that maturity did not equate with chronological age, therefore, the argument implied that desistance was a normal part of the human development process and an indication of healthy development.

This approach has been criticized for a number of reasons, especially for its implied contention that crime and delinquency reflects immaturity whereas law abidance represents a more advanced state of emotional, intellectual and physical development (Laub and Sampson 2003). Others have provided somewhat more reasoned explanations as to why individuals should be more inclined to abandon crime as a result of normal developmental processes. For example, Gove (1985) argued that cognitive and physiological changes were relevant to explaining the large-scale desistance from crime that occurred in late adolescence and early adulthood. Although critics have since argued that the changes in physical capabilities that he described are not as rapid as or coincidental to the decline in offending that is suggested by the age-crime curve (Steffensmeier and Allen 2001), there is growing evidence that important cognitive changes do take place in adolescence as a result of normal brain development. These changes, which appear to coincide with the period in which most individuals begin to disengage from crime, are thought to lead to improvements in executive functioning, including impulse control and the individual’s capacity for consequential thinking (Benson 2000). It is possible, therefore, that these changes do trigger desistance from crime for a great many adolescent criminals and delinquents.

Perhaps the best known contemporary version of the maturational perspective is that outlined by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) in their theory of self-control. A key component of their explanation of desistance concerns the distinction between crime and criminality, which they defined as the propensity to commit crimes. For Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) crimes are circumscribed events, whereas criminality refers to time-stable differences between individuals in the proclivity to commit crime. The primary determinant of criminal propensity is self-control or “the tendency to avoid acts whose long term costs exceed their immediate short-term benefits” (Hirschi and Gottfredson 2001, p. 83). According to Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), self-control is formed early in life as a result of effective parental socialization. At some point, in late childhood, differences in levels of self-control between individuals become fixed and immutable such that those who were low in self-control as children will also be low in self-control, relative to others, as adults. This relative stability in self-control is especially important because it explains the widely observed stability of antisocial behavior. Those who commit crime as adults are likely to have committed crime as children because throughout their lives they have been among the group with the lowest levels of self-control and hence the greatest propensity to engage in crime.

At the same time, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) recognized that self-control, in absolute terms, could increase over time. In fact, they argued that as a result of continuing socialization throughout the lifespan, increases in self-control would continue to occur and that these absolute changes in self-control would lead to an overall reduction in the pool of potential offenders. Even though some individuals would continue to have low self-control, relative to all others throughout their lives, in time even their absolute levels of self-control should increase sufficiently to enable them to move away from crime. Thus, a defining feature of self-control theory as it relates to desistance is its refutation of the criminal career paradigm and the idea that the age-crime curve obscures a small, but significant group of offenders who do not desist from crime. In sharp contrast to that viewpoint, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) argued that all offenders eventually abandon crime. In fact, in light of their insistence that the age-crime curve described the patterns of offending of all individuals across time and place desistance could not be explained with reference to any sociological factors such as employment, marriage or military

service (Hirschi and Gottfredson 1983; Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). Instead, changes in criminal behavior occurred as a result of maturation or “the inexorable aging of the organism” (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990, p. 141). As these authors put it, “this explanation suggests that maturational reform is just that, change in behavior that comes with maturation; it suggests that spontaneous desistance is just that, change in behavior that cannot be explained and change that occurs regardless of what else happens” (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990, p. 136).

An important implication of self-control theory, in addition to other theoretical explanations that view desistance as the result of a normal development process, is that even though changes in criminal and delinquent behavior may coincide with key life-course transitions, such as marriage, these transitions are not causally related to the movement away from crime. Instead, life-events such as marriage are likely to be viewed from this perspective as indicators of the developmental process that promotes desistance or as, in the case of self-control theory, the result of an individual characteristic that makes involvement in crime less likely. Above all, these theoretical accounts are distinguished by their insistence that change is something that happens ordinarily as the result of normal developmental processes which themselves defy explanation. As explanations for desistance, therefore, they are largely incomplete.

Despite the strong relationship between age and crime in the aggregate, most criminologists seem to agree that the aggregate-level relationship between age and crime obscures a considerable degree of variation between individuals (Nagin, Farrington, and Moffit 1995). This research has been made possible by recent advances in statistical modeling that have enabled researchers to identify reasonably homogenous clusters of individuals who follow distinct patterns of development (Nagin and Land 1993, Nagin 2005). Use of these methods in multiple settings to analyze both self-report data and official measures of crime has led to the identification of a number of distinct offending profiles used (e.g. Nagin, Farrington, and Moffit 1995, Laub et al 1998, Bushway et al 2001, 2003). Although disagreements have centered on the number of distinct offending trajectories (Benson 2002), these studies recognize that although the overwhelming majority of offenders give up crime in early adulthood, a significant minority of offenders continue to commit crime at later points in their lives (Nagin, Farrington, and Moffit

1995, Bushway et al 2001, 2003). Even though these findings may not refute the assertions of Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) that desistance is inevitable, they clearly indicate that desistance does not follow the same pattern for all offenders. Thus, those theoretical accounts that emphasize developmental changes that occur most prominently in the adolescent period are useful for explaining the large-scale exodus from crime that occurs at that time, but they may not be able to account for the considerable variability that exists in the relationship between age and crime across the population. To explain desistance, therefore, requires an explanation of this variability without resorting to the tautological retort that those who desist from crime at one point are those who have matured.

### **Developmental and Typological Approaches**

In a review of the literature on stability and change in criminal offending, Moffitt (1993) offered an explanation for the divergent patterns of onset, continuation and desistance observed in empirical studies. She argued that the aggregate-level age-crime curve obscured two distinct types of offenders: adolescence-limited (AL) and life-course persistent (LCP) offenders. Although she has since acknowledged the likelihood that other offending typologies exist (Wright et al 1999, Moffitt et al 2003), her original taxonomy is an important example of the typological and developmental explanations for continuity and change in criminal behavior. These theories are distinguished by their emphasis on distinctive etiologies of criminal behavior for different categories of offenders as well as distinct prognoses for change.

Moffitt (1993) argued that the onset of offending for LCP offenders resulted from the interaction of neighborhood and individual psychological characteristics. She maintained that a small proportion of children were either born with or developed neuropsychological impairments early in life and that these impairments included an inability to regulate impulses and restrain their behavior (Moffitt 1993). As a result of these impairments, which were most likely to manifest themselves in conduct problems at early stages (Caspi et al 1987), LCP children were more likely to attract harsh and erratic parental responses. The inconsistency of parental treatment could then lead to an



exacerbation of existing behavioral problems that would in turn elicit further negative reactions from parents (Moffitt 1993). Overtime the antisocial tendencies of LCP children could “knife away” opportunities. For example, conduct problems in school would be associated with poor school performance which could reduce opportunities further and increase the likelihood of continued antisocial behavior. At some point, Moffitt (1993) reasoned that LCP children would attract the attention of the police and criminal justice agencies and that this would further increase the likelihood of continuation. In the end, LCP offenders would be distinguished by continuity of antisocial behavior over the course of their lives.

Adolescence-limited offenders, by contrast, as they name implied, engage in crime for a short period only. In fact, as the most numerous group of offenders, the late onset and early desistance from crime and delinquency in adolescence is the source of the distinctive shape of the age-crime curve. Moffitt (1993) argued that most adolescents are challenged by a maturity gap; that is, although they reach biological maturity and hence the physical capacity to live as adults, in most cases, they are socially precluded from achieving the same status as adults. During the adolescent years, these children engage in crime as a form of “social mimicry” (Moffitt 1993). Frustrated by the “maturity gap”, these individuals start to imitate the behavior of the LCP children around them and engage in crime as a way to achieve the trappings of adulthood to which they aspire (e.g. access to money, status, and sexual relationships). Gradually, however, these individuals are believed to age out of crime as they encounter a series of age-graded changes that lead to a diminution of the “maturity gap” and its disappearance altogether.

Importantly, Moffitt (1993) was cognizant of the possibility that some adolescence-limited offenders could be apprehended for their offenses and “entrapped” by their delinquent roles as predicted by labeling theory (e.g. Lemert 1972). However, for the most part, these individuals are able to abandon crime; instead, it the life-course persistent offenders who are most likely to be overtaken by the consequences of their criminal involvement to the point that change becomes less likely as time wears on.

## **Social Control Theory**

Laub and Sampson (2003, Sampson and Laub 1993) provide a different explanation for continuity and change in criminal behavior as well as a different assessment of its extent. Although the process by which individuals entered into crime was a critical concern in their work, it is their life-course theory of social control as an explanation for continuity and change that has attracted most attention. In essence, their theory seeks to explain the apparent continuity of offending, at the same time as demonstrating the widespread possibility of change. The key premise of the age-graded theory of social control is that involvement in crime is caused by the loosening of the social bonds that constrain criminal behavior. Conversely, reductions in criminal offending, including desistance, can be explained by the establishment or re-establishment of social bonds. Hence, according to the age-graded theory of social control, as opposite sides of the same coin, continuity and change are explained by the same causal process.

Their rejection of the typological approach and their insistence that continuity and change are explained by the same process are based on two key arguments. First, even though a large proportion of adult criminals had been involved in crime and delinquency at an early age, childhood and adolescent criminality are exceedingly poor prospective predictors of crime in later life (Sampson and Laub 1993, Laub and Sampson 2003). Far too many antisocial children managed to avoid criminal lives and this was true even of those individuals who had been officially labeled as criminal or delinquent (Laub and Sampson 1993). Their research shows that using childhood and adolescent antisocial behavior as a predictor of later criminal behavior significantly over-predicts adult criminality (Laub and Sampson 2003). Moreover, there is nothing inherent in the attributes or behavior of children or adolescents that enables researchers to accurately predict trajectories of antisocial behavior in adulthood prospectively. Despite the theoretical appeal of terms such as adolescence-limited and life-course persistent behavior, these labels cannot be applied prospectively with any accuracy.

Second, long-term monitoring of criminal and delinquent behavior reveals that even seemingly persistent offenders abandon crime eventually. To explain these patterns, Laub and Sampson (2003; Sampson and Laub 1993) reasoned that at different times in

their lives individuals experienced “turning points” that could help direct them from criminal pathways to more conventional ways of life. The “age-graded” nature of these changes helped explain why so many people ceased offending in late adolescence and adulthood (Laub and Sampson 2003). However, many of these changes were experienced at later points in life and when they did occur they frequently resulted in lasting behavioral change. Of these changes, marriage emerged as the most significant (Laub and Sampson 2003; see also Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998, Warr 1998). Marriage helped individuals abandon crime because it represented a form of attachment. In similar respects to the role played by attachment in social bonding theory (Hirschi 1969), these authors argued that married individuals had more “social capital” and were more “bonded” to society and as such, were less likely to commit crime. Marriage also included a rational component; that is, marital bonds were described as a form of investment that would be jeopardized by criminal behavior (Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998).

At the same time, Laub and Sampson (1995, 2003) were aware that there was considerable continuity in offending, but as they point out, this continuity stops well short of life-course persistence. To explain this continuity, they examined the impact that prior offending could have on subsequent life opportunities. In particular, they reasoned that criminal offending could reduce opportunities for change in later life as a result of a process of “cumulative disadvantage”. The reasoning behind this process was similar to the concept of “knifing away opportunities” described by Moffitt (1993); that is, changes in the life-course can increase as well as decrease subsequent opportunities. The most important of these, as noted by Laub and Sampson (1993, 1995) concerned the effect of imprisonment on life opportunities. As they note, imprisonment can significantly reduce opportunities for change and this is most likely to occur as a result of the loss of employment that results from long-periods of imprisonment (Laub and Sampson 1995). Recent research on the effects of police and judicial intervention of crime has demonstrated that much of the effect of judicial intervention is mediated by the impact of intervention on prospects for employment (Bernburg and Krohn 2003). However, even seemingly persistent offenders desist from crime (Laub and Sampson 2003).

## **Rational-Choice Theory**

The key premise of the rational choice perspective, as applied to the study of desistance, is that the decision to abandon crime results from a change in the perceived balance of its costs and benefits; specifically, desisting offenders choose to desist because the costs of crime exceed its benefits. Thus, a related and implicit premise of the rational-choice explanation for desistance is that behavioral change follows the decision to disengage from crime. From the perspective of rational-choice theory, desisting offenders are viewed as “reasoning decision-makers” (Cornish and Clarke 1986, p. 13) who come to the realization, albeit belatedly, that crime is an ineffective means of maximizing their interests. There is considerable evidence in support of this perspective and the argument that the decision to give up crime is based on a change in the perceived costs or benefits of criminal activity (Shover and Thompson 1992).

For many researchers, changes in the perceived costs and benefits of crime are precipitated by external “shocks” (Cusson and Pinsonneault 1986). The idea that exogenous shocks can trigger changes in the thinking or cost benefit calculus of active offenders has a long-history in criminology. As Sutherland (1937, p. 182) noted “it is generally necessary for the thief to suffer some shock or jolt before he will face the future seriously”. Examples of these incidents include the death of an accomplice, a significant betrayal by criminal associates, or an injury or accident sustained in the course of committing crime (Cusson and Pinsonneault 1986, Maruna 1997). As one reforming offender noted, “The last one [car] I stole I rolled on the motorway and it scared the living daylights out of me, and since then I haven’t bothered ... since then I just sought of not interested in theft, bugger it” (Liebrich 1993, p. 221).

At the same time, many offenders experience a more gradual shift in the perceived benefits of crime through a process of “delayed deterrence” (Cusson and Pinsonneault 1986). Rather than an abrupt event that precipitates change, delayed deterrence is defined as “the gradual wearing down of the criminal drive caused by the accumulation of punishments” (Cusson and Pinsonneault 1986). For Cusson and Pinsonneault (1986), delayed deterrence could manifest itself in four ways: first, a higher estimate of the cumulative probability of punishment; second, an awareness of the

mounting difficulties of imprisonment; third, the realization that the accumulation of convictions can lead to drastic increases in the severity of criminal sentences; and fourth, a pervasive spread of fear throughout the life of the individual (Cusson and Pinsonneault 1986). As offenders age, these accumulated losses sustained over years in prison may even take on greater significance. As one 45-year-old parolee noted, “I guess you get to the point where you think, well, ... you’re getting old, you’re getting ready to die and you’ve never really lived or something” (Shover 1983, p. 211).

Although imprisonment is one of the most obvious costs of crime, it is important to note that the costs of crime extend well beyond the costs imposed by the threat of formal sanctions. Crime can lead to physical injury and betrayal, the loss of friends and valued family relationships, as well as a host of other hardships than can weigh just as heavily on the individual as the pains of imprisonment. As one respondent noted to Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph (2002), “I’m through ... I’m really, really, really tired of that life. I don’t want it no more man”. These experiences are often heightened when offenders are forced to consider the alternative lives that they might have led. As Laub and Sampson (2003) note, many of the long-term offenders who they interviewed professed profound regret for their lives they had not lived and the opportunities that they had wasted. Others may become more cognizant that the benefits of crime are limited such that even if the costs of crime have not changed, the perceived benefits no longer justify their involvement. For example, Shover and Thomson (1992) observed that expectations of the rewards of crime were an important predictor of desistance among a sample of ex-offenders. Irrespective of their losses, therefore, over time, many individuals become gradually aware that the costs of crime exceed its benefits.

Of course, changes in the perceived cost-benefit calculus of crime need not wait for age and can occur in response to specific events in the lives of individuals. Life-course transitions such as marriage, parenthood, employment, or military service could promote desistance, from the standpoint of rational-choice theory, if such changes can add to the costs of crime or lower its perceived benefits. In similar respects to one of the key mechanisms of social control theory, this is especially likely to occur if such changes provide active offenders with a stake in conformity; that is, if the event increases the likely costs of engagement in crime. Thus, as one desisting offender remarked to

Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph (2002), “having a baby ... changed a whole lot of me. I know I had a responsibility and I mean if I did this wrong, they would come and take him”. For her, becoming a parent raised her stakes in conformity thereby providing her with a forceful incentive to abandon crime.

Despite some apparent similarities to other perspectives, however, rational-choice explanations of desistance are distinguished by their emphasis on the decision-making process and in particular, on the decision to desist from crime. According to the rational-choice perspective, therefore, most of the important work of the desistance process is done once the offender decides to abandon crime. That said, as many qualitative studies of desistance have made clear, the initial decision to abandon crime is only part of the overall desistance process. Life history narratives show that many offenders try to give up crime unsuccessfully many times before they eventually succeed in doing so (e.g. Maruna 1997). As the stories of such false-starters suggest, success in staying away from crime may depend not only on the decision to quit crime, but also on the ability of a person to stick to that decision each day thereafter. At the same time, there is some evidence that some offenders manage to avoid crime without ever having intended to do so (Laub and Sampson 2003, Shover 1983). Thus, if we are to understand desistance, we need to understand how an individual can sustain a commitment to abandon antisocial behavior (even in the absence of a deliberate decision to do so).

### **Differential Association and Social Learning Theory**

The basic proposition of social learning theory is that crime is learned behavior (Akers 1998). According to the theory, crime is learned through differential association with other individuals who provide the social context in which the opportunities to imitate criminal and delinquent behavior are acquired, the definitions favorable to crime are learned, and differential reinforcement of behavior takes place. Exposure to different values, norms, and attitudes of others can have an impact on individual behavior through the acquisition of such attitudes (Burgess and Akers 1966, Akers 1998, Matsueda 1982). In addition to providing the context in which individuals can learn the definitions that support criminal behavior, differential association also provides opportunities to imitate

criminal and delinquent behavior. Once imitation occurs, however, it becomes less important to the explanation of crime for, after the point of initiation, differential reinforcement takes over as the driving force of the social learning process (Akers 1998). Hence, direct association and interaction with others who are engaged in criminal behavior are the principal means through which crime is learned to the extent that people are more likely to commit crime if they associate with others who are already involved in crime (Warr and Stafford 1991; Warr 1993).

Given the importance of differential association to social learning theory, a key mechanism by which desistance is likely to occur is through changes in the types of people with whom an offender associates. As individuals spend less time in the company of their friends, especially in the company of friends who are already involved in crime, they are less likely to be involved in crime. Thus, Warr (1993) demonstrated that changes in peer association in late adolescence and early adulthood are associated with changes in criminal and delinquent behavior over time. He observed that time spent with friends, loyalty to friends, and exposure to delinquent peers, all declined considerably over time and that these changes were associated with reductions in criminal behavior. In fact, “the association between age and crime is substantially weakened and, for some offenses, disappears entirely” when controlling for differential association (Warr 1993, p. 35).

It is important to note that changes in peer association do not occur entirely by default, but are precipitated, at least to some degree, by the life-course transitions that punctuate late adolescence and early adulthood. For example, Warr (1998) observed that married individuals spent considerably less time in the company of their friends and were much less likely to have friends who were involved in crime and delinquency and, therefore, were themselves less likely to be involved in crime. Thus, from the standpoint of social learning theory, life-course transitions such as marriage may promote desistance primarily by reducing an individual’s associations with antisocial influences.

### **Theories of Cognitive Transformation and Identity Change**

In similar respects to rational-choice explanations for desistance, the cognitive transformation approach maintains that people give up crime because they choose to do

so. Desistance is considered to be dependent on the offender having made a conscious choice to move away from crime. However, in contrast to the rational-choice perspective, the decision to quit crime is not in and of itself sufficient to understand desistance. The cognitive transformation approach emphasizes a series of psychological changes that act as precursors to and guarantors of the desistance process. Some of these changes reflect changes in attitudes, beliefs, and objectives, including the acceptability and justifiability of criminal and delinquent behavior. Others transformations might reflect perceptual changes, such as a shift in the way the individual sees or defines him or herself.

Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph (2002) identify four types of cognitive transformation. First, successful desistance begins with openness to change. Unless a person is looking for the means to move away from crime, she or he is unlikely to recognize the opportunities that may arise. It is important to note that preparedness to change is not necessarily the same thing as having made the decision to abandon crime. Frustration with the costs of crime may be sufficient to ready an individual for change even if she or he has not actually decided to pursue a non-deviant way of life (Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph 2002). Second, in order to disengage from crime successfully, individuals need to be open to the opportunities for change that may arise in their lives, including life-events such as marriage. Openness to such “hooks for change” is distinct from openness to change itself (Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph 2002). A person can be prepared to change or willing to do so because she or he recognizes that the costs of crime have come to exceed its benefits, but she or he may still not see the prospect of a romantic relationship as an opportunity to disengage from crime. Differences between individuals in their openness to potential life-course transitions can lead to widely divergent outcomes. Hence, as a young drug-dealer remarked to Hagedorn (1994, p. 209), “I’m not going to go by the slow way ... working at some chicken job ... [only to] get fired when I come in high or drunk ... or miss a day or something because I got high smoking weed, drinking beer”. Although some people might see a minimum job as an opportunity to earn a living and get out of crime, others are likely to avoid such chances, seeing neither as incompatible with their continued involvement in crime or as opportunities to initiate some fundamental changes in their lives.



Third, desistance is more likely to occur if the desisting offender can begin to envision or create an alternative identity that is based on convention and the repudiation of crime and deviance. Identity change is the distinguishing characteristic of the cognitive transformation approach and is a central theme in a great deal of desistance research, especially in those studies based on the life history narratives of reforming offenders. For example, Maruna (2001, p. 7) argues that “in order to desist from crime, ex-offenders need to develop a coherent, prosocial identity for themselves”. This requires, among other things, that they can develop “a coherent and credible self-story to explain ... how their checkered pasts could have led to their new, reformed identities” (Maruna 2001, p. 8). In fact, in light of the perceived importance of identity change, as I noted earlier, Maruna and Farrall (2004) consider it a necessary precondition of the definition of desistance.

Fourth, successful desistance also requires that these changes in personal identity must also be accompanied by a fundamental shift in how the desisting offender views criminal behavior. Given that much of the motivation to engage in crime may stem from the seductions of crime or its “sneaky thrills” (Katz 1988), Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph (2002) argue that if an individual is to give up on crime she or he needs to see criminal behavior as being undesirable and incompatible with his or her newly acquired pro-social identity. Thus, “the desistance process can be seen as relatively complete when the actor no longer sees these same behaviors as positive, viable, or even personally relevant” (Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph 2002, p. 1002).

It is important to note, however, that although identity change may require the complete repudiation of crime desisting offenders often build their refashioned identities around their wayward experiences. As Maruna (2001) notes, the establishment of a new conventional identity often requires a personal story or narrative that enables the reforming offender to reconcile his or her past and present selves. In some cases, the dissonance created by identity change is overcome by the development of an intergenerational script; that is, a story that sees prior involvement in crime as a stage that one had to endure in order to be in the position to help others (Maruna 2001). In these cases, in particular, the establishment of a new identity does not require the total

abandonment of a delinquent or criminal self-concept; indeed, the old self becomes a critical aspect of the new (Maruna 2001; see also Brown 1991).

The cognitive transformation approach recognizes that key life-events such as marriage, employment, or military service may play a prominent role in the desistance process. However, in contrast to other theoretical perspectives which acknowledge the effects of exogenous events on the individual, the cognitive transformation emphasizes the causal significance of social-psychological change and the “upfront work accomplished by the actors themselves”. Events in the life-course such as marriage are thought to influence criminal and delinquent behavior only in so far as the individual is attentive to the opportunities afforded by those events and their consequences for their lives and actions. Thus, Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph (2002) acknowledge that marriage might help instigate desistance and provide the social support necessary for the individual to continue to desist from crime even in the face of adversity. That said, according to the cognitive transformation approach, events such as marriage are most likely to affect desistance if offenders are open to the prospect of reform, likely to see their marriages as opportunities to change, and if their marriages promote identity transformation and fundamental shifts in the way they think about crime.

### **Conclusions**

As the definition of desistance and the theoretical perspectives offered to explain it suggest, it is unlikely that offenders immediately terminate crime in response to getting married or experiencing any other significant or propitious life event. Desistance seems to occur gradually. The process may or may not begin with the decision to quit crime, but it continues everyday that the reforming offender maintains his or her commitment to a conventional way of life. For some, the process of maintaining a state of non-offending may be easier than it is for others. Differences in the likelihood of completing the desistance project may be due to constitutional differences, differences in the etiology of offending, or the degree to which one is aided by attachments to conventional others. Clearly, there is no shortage of explanations for how and why people abandon crime.

Whatever the explanation, as the preceding discussion indicates, life-course transitions such as marriage can play a part in the desistance process for a host of reasons. Given that the various explanations of the desistance process offer distinctive perspectives on why such events might be associated with disengagement from crime, studying those transitions, in greater detail, may tell us more about the desistance process and ultimately help us adjudicate between these competing theoretical perspectives. To that end, in the next chapter, I propose a method of measuring desistance based on observed changes in self-reported criminal and delinquent behavior. In Chapter 4, I then examine the association between these changes and two seemingly-related life-course transitions — marriage and unmarried cohabitation.

## CHAPTER 3

In this chapter, I consider some of the methodological issues surrounding the empirical study of desistance and its relationship to cohabitation and marriage. Its purpose is to explore some themes that are common to the three empirical studies that comprise Chapters 4, 5, and 6. Measurement and analytical issues that are specific to each of the empirical studies will be explored in those chapters. Given the complexities and difficulties of defining desistance, as outlined in Chapter 2, I begin by discussing some key aspects of its measurement. I then describe the National Youth Survey (NYS) — the data used for the analyses reported in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 — and the ways in which those data are used to measure desistance from crime and learn more about its connection to marriage and cohabitation. Despite some limitations common to many longitudinal studies, the NYS provides a good opportunity to explore the themes developed in the remaining chapters: the empirical links between cohabitation and marriage and desistance from crime; the theoretical mechanisms that underpin those links; and the degree to which they vary between men and women. The chapter closes with a discussion of one of the main threats to the validity of research concerning the effects of life-course transitions on desistance from crime: the problem of self-selection. Although self-selection represents a particular challenge to research on crime and family relationships in adulthood, I discuss some analytical methods that can be used to minimize, if not eliminate, such threats.

### **The Measurement of Desistance**

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, trying to study the developmental nature of desistance raises a number of important challenges. The first of these problems, the indeterminacy of desistance, can be overcome, if not resolved completely, by specifying specific periods of time in which desistance may be observed. The second problem, however, the need to identify alternative manifestations of the desistance process (other than the termination of offending), is somewhat more intractable. As noted in Chapter 2, there is little direct evidence, that observable changes in criminal behavior, other than the

transition from a state of offending to one of non-offending, are either necessary or sufficient indicators that an individual is desisting from crime. Thus, the only universally applicable outward expression of desistance is the termination of offending.

Heterogeneity in desistance implies that abstinence from crime should be its preeminent indicator. Other changes, such as reductions in the number of or types of offenses committed, might signify that an individual is moving away from crime and so might be used to help researchers observe developmental processes that, in some cases, result in the termination of offending. Nonetheless, they should never replace the non-observance of offending as the defining characteristic of desistance. The first criterion for measuring desistance, therefore, is that it enables researchers to observe individuals who change from committing one or more offenses to committing none. Other measures may be used to supplement our understanding of desistance, in so far as they tell us how termination might take place, but they should not be used in the place of indicators that aim, above all, to distinguish the inactive offender from his or her active past.

Of course, as I also explained in Chapter 2, desistance represents more than mere changes in offending. Desistance also denotes the process by which a durable, if not permanent, change in criminal behavior takes place. This combination of two seemingly irreconcilable features — change and continuity — complicates the measurement of desistance considerably. Most statistical models that are used to study desistance focus exclusively on the former and as a result, neglect the importance of studying how initial changes in behavior become fixed as durable patterns of conduct (Farrington and West 1995, Sampson and Laub 1993, Maume, Ousey and Beaver 2005). Given that many desisting offenders make several unsuccessful attempts to change and that countless others succeed only by struggling to overcome obstacles on the road to reform (Maruna 1997, 2001, Sommers, Baskin, and Fagan 1994, Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph 2002), the ability to abstain from crime over time may be as important to understanding desistance as an initial temporal break in an ongoing pattern of antisocial behavior. As Mulvey et al (2004, p. 222) suggest, “any measurement of desistance should be able to demonstrate ... [that] antisocial behavior has remained below a certain low level for some reasonable period of time” (Mulvey et al 2004, p. 222). Hence, the second criterion

for measuring desistance should be that it enables researchers to observe a change of some meaningful duration.

Given the need to satisfy both of these criteria, one approach to measuring desistance might be to develop a single indicator of which offenders had desisted from crime and which had not. According to this scheme, individuals are classified as having desisted if they were involved in crime prior to some point in time, but had abstained from it for some specified period of time after that point. This approach, which I use in Chapter 5 to study the theoretical underpinnings of the links between adult family relationships and desistance, aims to improve our understanding of desistance by comparing individuals who desist to those who do not. Although it is based, in principle, on the observance of between-individual differences, it differs from most conventional applications of that method that are concerned with examining cross-sectional differences. Instead, this approach is focused primarily on differences in the likelihood that individuals will abandon crime. Thus, change of some specified duration, is the dependent variable.

Despite its simplicity, in terms of providing a single indicator of an exceptionally complicated concept, the above approach has one chief limitation: it is exceedingly sensitive to the timing of the observations. Even minor changes in either the instant at which the behavior of the individual is first examined, for evidence of prior offending, or the moment at which his or her behavior is re-examined for evidence of abstinence or recidivism, could have dramatic effects on who is classified as having desisted from crime. For example, the initial observation period, if fixed too late in the lifespan, could miss a number of formerly active offenders who had already desisted from crime. In similar respects, if the second point of measurement follows the first too closely it may lead to the exclusion of many individuals who will desist from crime at some later stage.

The alternative approach, adopted in Chapter 4, avoids the need for a separate indicator of desistance by invoking analytical methods that can be used to assess both changes in offending and the continuity of non-offending simultaneously. These hierarchical or multilevel models divide the cross-sectional and time-series variations in criminal behavior that can be observed in a given sample into two distinct components — individual changes in behavior over time and enduring behavioral differences between

individuals. These two components can then be regressed on time-varying and time-stable correlates. Thus, such hierarchical or multilevel models are ideal for assessing the effects of life-course transitions on both the likelihood of experiencing changes in criminal behavior and the maintenance of non-offending over time.

### **The National Youth Survey**

Either of these approaches, if used to study desistance and its links to adult family relationships, requires fairly comprehensive information on a sample of offenders over time. Aside from the obvious need for information about their marriages and involvement in unmarried cohabiting relationships, in addition to information regarding the possible mechanisms by which the formation of such relationships may contribute to desistance, as discussed in Chapter 2, at the very least, the project also requires some indication of whether those individuals were involved in a reasonably comprehensive range of offenses at various points in time over a reasonably prolonged period. Although several data sources may fulfill some of those requirements, the National Youth Survey (NYS) is unique as a publicly-available source of information that meets all of these needs.

The NYS is a longitudinal survey of crime and delinquency based on a national probability sample of 1,725 respondents, who were born between 1959 and 1965. Respondents were interviewed annually from 1977 through to 1981 and then again in 1984 and 1987. On each occasion, they were asked about their personal and family backgrounds in addition to extensive information about their attitudes, beliefs, peer and intimate relationships, and their experiences in the preceding year. Of critical importance is the fact that respondents were asked also about their participation in an extensive range of delinquent acts and criminal offences including, though not limited to, assault, burglary, theft, and robbery (Elliot and Ageton 1980). The combination of a longitudinal research design and such detailed information on a range of topics, including involvement in crime, provides an ideal opportunity to assess the links between adult family relationships and desistance.

Of course, in similar respects to other longitudinal studies, the National Youth Survey has its limitations: first, since it is based on a national, probability sample, the

NYS includes only a small percentage of serious, high-level criminal offenders (Cernkovich, Giordano, and Pugh 1985); and second, its restricted age-range naturally focuses attention on desistance in adolescence and early adulthood. In part, the latter of these problems is exacerbated by changes to the survey instrument which have, in effect, narrowed the focus of this dissertation, even further, to the last four publicly-available waves of the survey. Thus, Chapters 4 and 6 are based on the responses of 1626 respondents who had participated in a least one of the last four publicly-available waves (i.e. 1979, 1980, 1981, and 1986). Participants were aged between 15 and 21 in 1979 and between 22 and 28 in 1986. Chapter 5 concentrates on a subset of those respondents — a subset of those who participated in both 1980 and 1983<sup>1</sup>. These respondents were aged between 19 and 25 in 1983.

Prior research has confirmed that the sample of respondents who participated in the initial survey was representative of American 11 to 17 year-olds in 1976 (Elliott and Huizinga 1983). As with any longitudinal study, the NYS experiences some attrition over the years (Brame and Piquero 2003). Nonetheless, drop-out rates at each wave of the NYS are not substantial. Eighty percent of the original 1725 respondents and 85 percent of the 1626 respondents who participated in at least one of the last four waves responded to the 1986 survey. Moreover, as others have noted with respect to these data, the “loss [of respondents] by age, sex, ethnicity, class, place of residence, and reported delinquency did not substantially influence the underlying distributions on these variables” (Elliott et al 1989, p. 3). Of the 1626 respondents whose responses provide the basis for the analyses presented in Chapter 4, 53 percent were male. Fifteen percent were African-American, 4 percent Hispanic, and 79 percent were European-American.

The main consequence of sample attrition over the seven publicly-available waves of the NYS is that it contributes, to some degree, to an apparent decline in self-reported criminal and delinquent behavior over time (Brame and Piquero 2003, see Lauritsen 1998 and Thornberry 1989 for alternative explanations for the decline). Thus, even though

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<sup>1</sup> Respondents were interviewed again in 1989, 1992, 1998, and 2002, but these data have not been released for public use. In May 2006, I requested permission to the 1989 and 1992 waves of the data. However, at the time of writing, access had not been granted.



correlations among variables in the NYS are not likely to be affected significantly by sample attrition, failure to account for sample attrition could lead to an overestimation in the rate of desistance. Since this dissertation is not concerned with estimating the prevalence of desistance and is focused, instead, on explaining inter-individual changes in criminal behavior, the problems posed by sample attrition can be overcome merely by restricting attention to observable changes in behavior.

For some readers, the resulting emphasis on the ways in which the formation of their own family relationships can help enable adolescents and young adults to disengage from relatively low-level offending may be problematic. After all, some commentators have argued that there is little to be gained by studying delinquency in the adolescent period or studying low level offending among the adolescent population (Laub and Sampson 2003, Bottoms et al 2004). They suggest that, instead, researchers need to focus on the later stages of the life-course and also, presumably, on changes in behavior among those individuals who have extensive criminal histories. Notwithstanding these concerns, it is important to note that desistance from crime is most prevalent in late adolescence and young adulthood (Nagin and Land 1993, Nagin, Farrington, and Moffit 1995, Bushway et al 2003). The overwhelming majority of people who were involved in crime at some point in their lives desisted from further criminal involvement as they neared the end of their teenage years and entered the period of early adulthood. Looking at desistance at a much later period might be fruitful for understanding what factors are related to the desistance of more serious persistent offenders, but it tells us little about the majority of desisting offenders, the vast majority of whom were involved only in low levels of crime as adolescents. In any case, except for a very small number of long-term studies of criminal behavior (e.g. Farrington and West 1990, Laub and Sampson 2003), most studies of desistance are not able to monitor offenders for sufficiently long periods of time to be confident that desistance had taken place.

### **The Measurement of Crime and Delinquency**

For the purposes of measuring desistance from crime, I developed a dichotomous indicator of self-reported criminal participation. Respondents were coded 1 if they had

reported committing one or more of a range of criminal offenses in the previous calendar year and 0 otherwise. The offenses covered by the measure included drug sales, felony assault, felony theft, minor assault, minor theft, prostitution, and robbery. These measures were modeled on scales developed by Elliot, Huizinga, and Menard (1989) and were based on items that were included consistently in the seven publicly-available waves of the NYS. Together, they provide a comprehensive assessment of the degree to which respondents were involved in crime throughout the observation period. The survey items that comprised these offense-specific categories are shown in Table 3.1.

The same offenses covered by the dichotomous indicator of criminal prevalence were also used to develop two other indicators of criminal and delinquent behavior: first, an index of offense diversity; and second, an individual measure of the number of offenses that they reported committing. To estimate the diversity of offending I counted the total number of different types of offenses; specifically, I dichotomized the individual offense items within each offense-specific category and summed these for each respondent. To measure the level of offending committed by each individual, I counted the total number of times in the previous calendar year that respondents had reported committing the individual offenses that constituted the dichotomous crime indicator. As noted earlier, since reductions in the number or types of offenses committed may or may not result in desistance, these alternative measures are intended only to supplement the principal measure of criminal participation: the dichotomous indicator described above. To that end, the two auxiliary measures were used to replicate the analyses reported in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. Results of these analyses are consistent with those reported below.

Figure 3.1 shows the percentage of respondents, within each age group, who reported committing one or more offenses in 1979, 1980, 1983, and 1986. Overall, Figure 3.1 shows significant declines in the prevalence of criminal and delinquent behavior in the sample as respondents moved through adolescence and into early adulthood.

Admittedly, the graph also provides some evidence of a general decline in criminal prevalence in each survey year — a pattern observed in prior studies (Thornberry 1989; Lauritsen 1998) that could be due, to some extent, to attrition in the NYS sample (Brame and Piquero 2003; see also Cernkovich, Giordano and Pugh 1985). Nonetheless, the age differences in criminal prevalence within a single survey wave at a time and the overall

patterns of decline shown by the four lines in Figure 3.1 are consistent with the shape of the general age-crime curve, noted in Chapter 1, and observed in countless other studies.

Figure 3.2 shows the same information presented in a way that enables readers to observe changes in the prevalence of criminal behavior among each cohort in the NYS. Each line, in Figure 3.2, shows the proportion of respondents in a given birth cohort who reported committing one or more offenses in each of the four waves of the survey. The graph provides further evidence of an overall decline in criminal prevalence among respondents to the NYS. These patterns, perhaps indicating substantial desistance, are most apparent for two of the three youngest cohorts: those born in 1963 and 1964. Indeed, more than half of respondents born in those years reporting committing offenses in 1979 when they were aged 16 and 15 respectively. By 1986, aged 22 and 23, less than a third of them were reporting criminal involvement. At the same time, Figure 3.2 also indicates considerable heterogeneity in rates of decline. In fact, as can be seen, among the three oldest cohorts — those born in 1959, 1960, and 1961— the percentage of respondents reporting one or more offenses actually increased, albeit slightly, from 1983 to 1986, having declined steadily from the levels recorded in 1979. For others, criminal prevalence appeared to stabilize at some point after some initial drops.

Given these patterns, the National Youth Survey provides a useful basis for studying the effects of adult family relationships on desistance from crime. First, even if the trends revealed in Figures 3.1 and 3.2 reveal, to some extent, the effects of sample attrition, these graphs provide substantial *prima facie* evidence that a significant number of respondents desisted from crime between the years 1979 and 1986. Moreover, the reasonably high levels of prevalence observed across the seven birth cohorts and the considerable variability observed in their rates of change imply that there is significant variation in the distribution of the dependent variable to warrant its use in the analyses that follow. Before doing so, however, it may be useful to describe briefly the measures of cohabitation and marriage used in Chapters 4, 5, 6.

## **The Measurement of Cohabitation and Marriage**

Marital status (cohabitation and marriage) is measured in terms of the living arrangements of respondents in the years immediately preceding each survey interview. Specifically, I classified respondents as married only if they were living with their spouses and if they had lived together for the majority of the previous year (coded 1 if married, otherwise 0). In similar respects, those respondents who reported living with an intimate partner (i.e. boyfriend or girlfriend) with whom they were not married for the majority of the previous year were classified as cohabiting (coded 1 if cohabiting, otherwise 0). This method potentially includes same-sex relationships, which in prior studies have often been excluded deliberately (e.g. Simons et al 2002).

Not surprisingly, the prevalence of marriage among NYS respondents increased significantly between 1979 and 1986. In 1979, only 5 percent of respondents were classified as married and living with their spouses. By 1986, the percentage of married respondents had increased to 39 percent. Changes in the prevalence of cohabitation were less dramatic. Less than 2 percent of respondents, in 1979, reported living with their unmarried partners. Despite some increase in its popularity, only 7 percent of respondents were classified as being in a cohabiting relationship at the end of the observation period. Despite its relative unpopularity, as I indicate in Chapter 4, it is still possible to discern statistically significant relationships between cohabitation and criminal participation. Notwithstanding the small numbers of respondents in cohabiting relationships, therefore, these data can still be used to evaluate the links between cohabitation, marriage, and criminal desistance.

## **Cohabitation, Marriage and Self-Selection**

As noted in Chapter 2, not everyone agrees that life-course transitions, such as marriage, help promote desistance from crime. In perhaps the most extreme refutation of the notion that lasting changes in criminal and delinquent behavior occur in response to developments in the life-course, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) argued that the empirical relationships between crime, marriage, and other romantic relationships are spurious.

They argued that the same characteristic that influences criminal propensity and behavior — their concept of self-control — also shapes the likelihood that an individual will marry, establish a relationship, as well as the types of people with whom he or she is likely to establish such a relationship (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). Thus, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990, p. 141) claimed that “individual differences in the likelihood of crime tend to persist across the life course; there is no drastic reshuffling of the criminal and non-criminal populations based on unpredictable, situational events”.

Self-control could be expected to affect the formation and maintenance of adult family relationships in a number of ways. For one thing, individuals who have low self-control are believed to live in the moment and give only limited consideration to their futures. Marriage, on the other hand, involves a life-long commitment that implies some concern for the years ahead. As such, it could be argued that individuals with low self-control are less inclined to marry and relative to marriage, are perhaps more likely to find themselves in cohabiting relationships. Second, there is some reason to suspect that self-control might affect the ability of couples to maintain stable and satisfying relationships. Different aspects of self-control, including impulsivity, lack of conscientiousness, self-centeredness, and petulance, have been implicated as predictors of relationship instability (Caspi, Elder, and Bem 1987, Kelly and Conley 1987, Kurdeck 1993, Tucker, Kressin, and Spiro 1998). Thus, the probability of being married or being in a cohabiting relationship at any given point in time may be a function, in part, of an individual’s level of self-control, independently of the chances of having entered such a relationship.

Finally, it is likely that self-control also affect the characteristics of interpersonal relationships, especially the strength of emotional bonds — a key moderator of the link between marriage and desistance. For example, self-control has been shown to affect attachment style; that is, individuals lacking self-regulation are more inclined to exhibit avoidant and anxious-ambivalent attachment styles than secure attachment (Tagney, Baumeister, and Boone 2004). Since secure attachment is critical to the establishment and maintenance of strong emotional bonds, these results imply that individuals lacking self-control are significantly less likely to experience the kinds of relationships considered necessary to reduce criminal involvement. Indeed, “many of the disrupted patterns of communication and behavior exchange ... noted in disturbed couples may be seen as the

outgrowths of the personality characteristics of the partner” (Kelly and Conley 1987, p. 36; Tagney, Baumeister, and Boone 2004). Thus, much as Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) might have predicted, those who are most likely to form the kinds of relationships that are believed to promote disengagement from crime may be the very people who are least likely to be involved in crime — those individuals who are high in self-control.

Of course, self-control is one of a number of factors that may influence an individual’s prospects for marriage and cohabitation in addition to the likely characteristics of his or her relationship. For example, these events may also be affected by the attributes of his or her family-of-origin including, though not limited to, his or her family structure, the stability and successfulness of his or her parent’s marriage, and the strength of and durability, even into adulthood, of parent-child attachment (Kelly and Conley 1987, Glenn and Kramer 1987, Greenberg and Nay 1982, Holman, Larson and Harmer 1984). The overall point, therefore, is not that Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) are necessarily correct in their assertion that self-control can account for the widely-acknowledged connections between marriage and crime, but that the occurrence of marriage is not randomly determined. Thus, estimates of its effects on crime that fail to take account of these selection processes are likely to be biased and incorrect.

The problem of bias arises because, in most cases, such models violate the assumption of zero covariance between the independent variables and the error term. Importantly, this can occur even if indicators of the exogenous factors are included in the original model since in the absence of perfect measurement of the independent variables, there may be some unobserved factors that are correlated with the independent and dependent variables. More likely, however, such bias results from the failure to control for other unobserved factors that affect both the transitions of interest — in this case marriage or cohabitation — and involvement in crime.

To some extent, hierarchical or multilevel statistical models, similar to those described briefly earlier, can be used to overcome these problems (Horney, Osgood, and Marshal 1995; Brame, Bushway, and Paternoster 1999; Laub and Sampson 2003). To that end, for the key independent variables of interest, each respondent is assigned his or her mean score as calculated over the entire period of the study. In addition, an individual-specific, time-varying change score is also calculated as the difference

between each time-varying score in each time period and his or her individual-specific mean. Thus, in the case of marriage, measured using a dichotomous indicator as described above, the first independent variable would generally correspond to the proportion of the study period in which the individual had been married and the second independent variable would be the difference between this score and his or her time-specific marriage score (Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995; Laub and Sampson 2003; Sampson, Laub, and Wimer 2006). In so far as the time-varying change score is necessarily uncorrelated with any observed or unobserved time-stable characteristics — each individual's mean deviation score is equal to zero — estimates of the effects of marriage on changes in criminal behavior are unbiased by the exclusion of unobserved, time-stable differences between individuals. This approach offers a robust and reasonably popular method of dealing with the problem of persistent, unobserved heterogeneity (Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995, Brame, Paternoster, and Bushway 1999).

It should be noted, however, that the use of hierarchical or multilevel models does not overcome the problem of unobserved heterogeneity completely. First, as I discussed earlier, given the need to study desistance as an ongoing process of maintenance, the effects of time spent in marriage or cohabitation on enduring differences between individuals in terms of their criminal and delinquent behavior are also of interest. Nonetheless, in the hierarchical or multilevel modeling solution, outlined above, such between-individual estimators are still subject to bias caused by the omission of time-stable characteristics. Second, the within-individual estimators, which would be used to estimate the marriage and cohabitation on inter-individual changes in criminal behavior, are still subject to biases resulting from unobserved, time-varying factors. Of course, no study using observational data is able to definitively rule out the possibility that unobserved factors may account, in some small way, for the results it obtains.

## **Conclusions**

The need to measure desistance as an ongoing dynamic process and to relate that process to life-course transitions, such as the development of adult family relationships, presents a considerable challenge. Most statistical methods can readily relate changes in

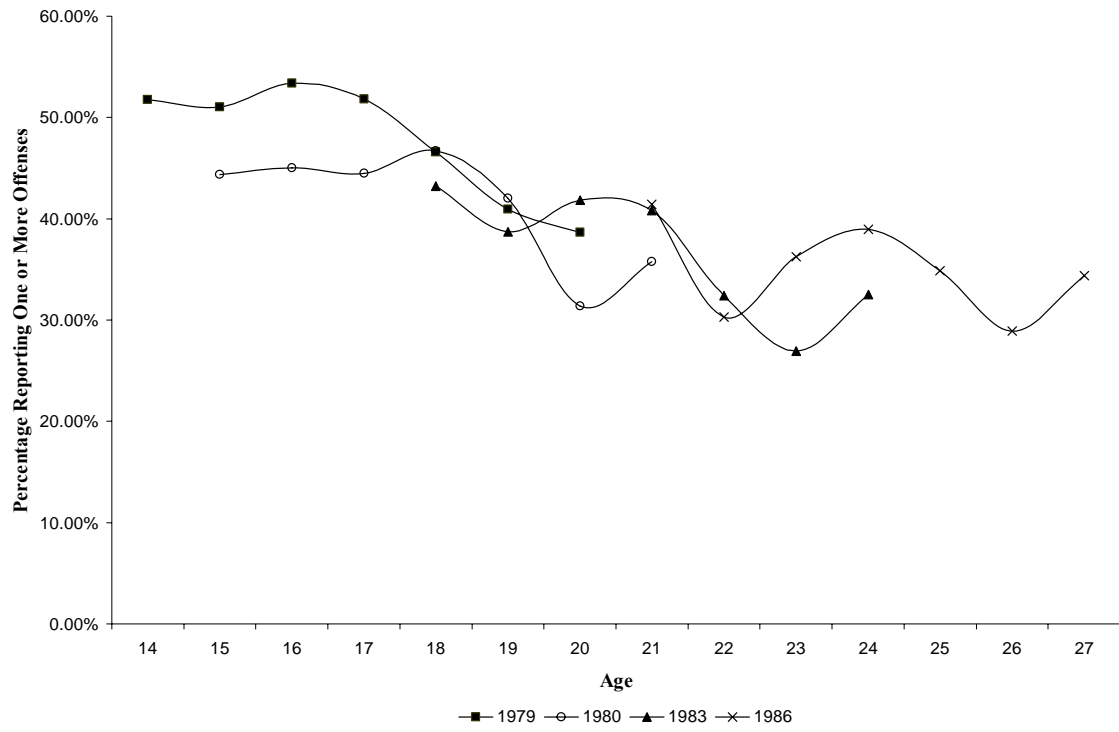
one life domain to changes in another, but those same methods do not necessarily lend themselves to correlating change and stability. To some extent, these problems can be overcome through the use of analytical methods and approaches that examine the correlates of within-individual change independently of the correlates of between-individual differences in offending. They can also be resolved by developing direct indicators of desistance that incorporate change and continuity into its measurement. Both approaches are adopted in this dissertation and in the analyses to follow.

Of course, the most important function of any indicator of desistance or any analytical method used to understand its development is that it can distinguish between states of offending and non-offending; that is, moments in which the individual is involved in crime and stages, subsequent to that involvement, in which his or her participation in crime and delinquency is not merely low, but negligible. Thus, changes in the number of or type of offenses committed should not be the key determinant of desistance. Instead, desistance should be measured in terms of the abandonment of crime, for some reasonable period of time, by individuals who had previously engaged in it. With measures and methods that are faithful to the definition of the concept, as outlined in Chapter 2, I begin the task of clarifying the role of adult family relationships in the desistance process. To that end, in the next chapter, I examine the empirical links between cohabitation and marriage and the extent to which both kinds of adult family relationships can contribute to desistance from crime.

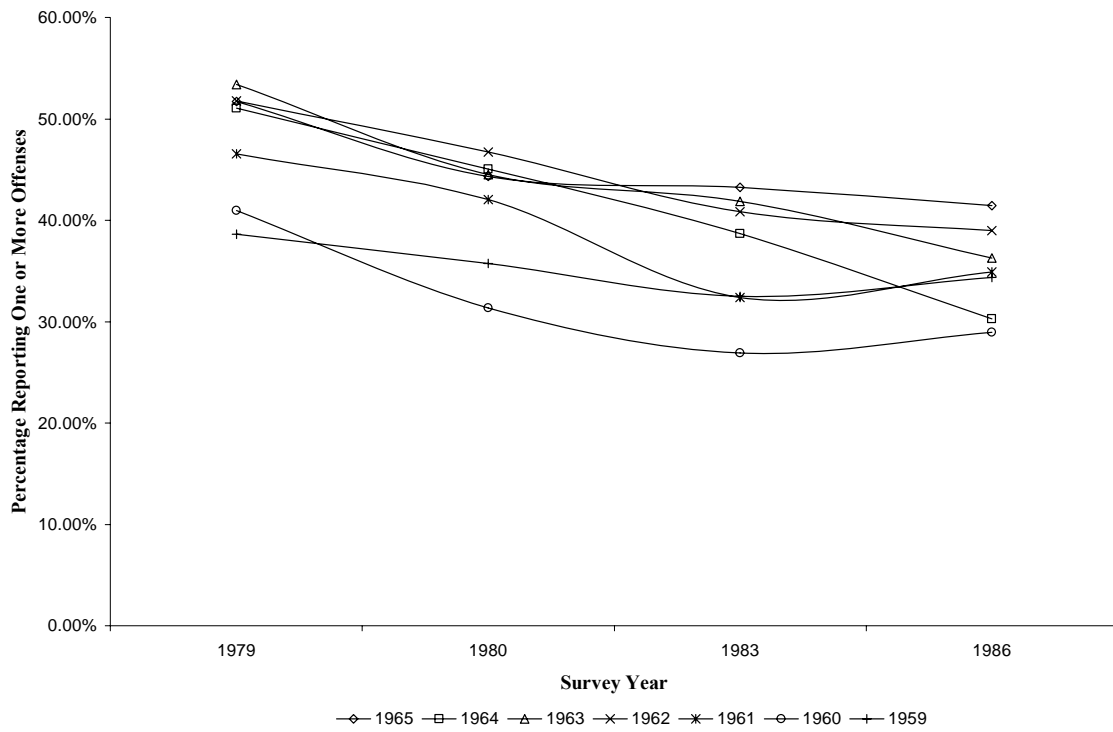


**Table 3.1 Offenses Included in Dichotomous Indicator of Crime and Delinquency**

<b>Offense-Type</b>	<b>Offense</b>
Drug Sales	Sold marijuana Sold hard drugs
Felony Assault	Attacked someone Been in gang fights Sexual assault
Felony Theft	Stolen motor vehicle Stolen something worth more than \$50 Bought stolen goods Broke into building or vehicle
Minor Assault	Hit parent
Minor Theft	Stolen something worth less than \$5 Stolen money from family Taken vehicle without the owners permission Avoided paying for things Stolen things \$5 to \$50
Prostitution	Been paid to have sex with someone
Robbery	Used force on students



**Figure 3.1: Percentage of Respondents in Each Age Group Reporting One or More Offenses, By Year of Interview**



**Figure 3.2: Changes in Criminal Prevalence by Year of Birth, 1979-1986**

## CHAPTER 4

As noted in Chapter 1, the empirical links between desistance and transformative life events, such as marriage, are well known (Sampson and Laub 1993, Farrington and West 1995, Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995, Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998, Laub and Sampson 2003, Sampson, Laub, and Wimer 2006), but the evidence that analogous life changes, such as entering a cohabiting relationship, can also facilitate changes in criminal behavior is less conclusive (Laub and Sampson 2003; Laub, Sampson, and Wimer 2006). Despite the fact that some qualitative studies have observed that cohabitation can promote disengagement from crime, most quantitative research on the subject indicates that these relationships fail to advance desistance (e.g. Yamaguchi and Kandel 1985; Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995; Warr 1998). In fact, cohabitation may even encourage individual involvement in crime (Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995).

One plausible explanation for these discrepant results is that cohabitation and marriage are not as similar as they may appear. There are some notable differences between the two types of relationships and these differences could manifest themselves in ways that affect the causes of crime. As a result, cohabitation may not expose individuals to the kinds of experiences that make desistance more likely. An alternative explanation is that cohabitation operates in much the same way as marriage, but its effects on crime have been overlooked because researchers have failed to take account of the factors that moderate its impact. There is ample evidence that the effect of marriage on crime is not categorical and that it depends on an array of individual and relationship characteristics, including the strength of emotional attachments between partners (Sampson and Laub 1993; Laub, Nagin and Sampson 1998; Laub and Sampson 2003). The same might also be true of cohabitation.

To date, there has not been a single published study that has examined the extent to which the effects of cohabitation on crime depend on the characteristics of the relationship. In the case of cohabitation, this may be a particular problem because levels of quality appear to differ across the two types of relationships. In particular, people in cohabiting relationships report less relationship satisfaction, stability, commitment, and more negative interactions than married couples (Nock 1995, Brown and Booth 1996)

Failure to take account of the conditioning influence of relationship quality, therefore, may give the impression that cohabitation does not reduce crime because in most cases — when attachment and commitment are low — it does not.

The purpose of this Chapter is to address these shortcomings. I do so by investigating the degree to which relationship characteristics moderate the links between cohabitation, marriage, and crime. Specifically, I test two hypotheses: first, that the experience of entering and maintaining high-quality cohabiting and marital relationships is associated with reductions in criminal behavior; and second, that high-quality cohabiting and marital relationships affect crime in similar ways.

This research is important for a number of reasons. First, marriage rates have declined tremendously within the last thirty years, but much of that decline has been offset by increases in the popularity of non-marital cohabitation (Bumpass and Sweet 1989; Bumpass and Lu 1999; Casper and Cohen 2000). In fact, among some age groups, cohabitation is now more common than marriage (Smock 2000). Whether cohabitation is actually replacing marriage or merely delaying it, it is worth knowing whether cohabitation is capable of promoting desistance to the same degree as marriage. Second, there are significant racial and ethnic differences in the roles of cohabitation and matrimony in the United States (Lichter et al 1992, Raley 1996). Thus, the degree to which cohabitation can help constrain crime may have important implications for our understanding of racial and ethnic differences in crime. Third, differences in the effects of distinct social roles and relationships on crime have important implications for our theoretical understanding of desistance. By identifying which types of social relationships are most likely to promote desistance and which ones do not, researchers can begin isolating the reasons for those differences and begin to develop a richer and more nuanced understanding of the desistance process.

### **Marriage and Crime**

There is now a considerable body of research showing that marriage is negatively related to involvement in crime. Not only are married individuals less likely to commit crime than their single counterparts (Farrington and West 1995; Warr 1998; King,

Massoglia, and MacMillan 2007), but the experiences of entering marriage and staying married are also associated with reductions in offending even among individuals with a history of wrong-doing (Sampson and Laub 1993; Horney, Osgood and Marshall 1995; Laub and Sampson 2003). These positive benefits of marriage have been observed in the short-term (Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995) and over decades or even scores of years (Laub and Sampson 2003). Furthermore, these associations have been observed across time and place in both qualitative and quantitative studies (Meisenhelder 1977; Gibbens 1984; Shover 1983; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; Blockland and Nieuwbeerta 2005). In fact, the evidence that marriage actually causes these changes in criminal conduct is about as strong as is possible using observational data (Sampson, Laub, and Wimer 2006) and the empirical association between marriage and desistance is one of the most robust findings of research in life-course criminology.

Different theories provide different explanations for these patterns, but the research points to at least four ways in which marriage may suppress involvement in crime. Perhaps the most frequently cited explanation for the empirical association between marriage and crime concerns the role of marriage as an agent of informal social control (Laub and Sampson 2001, Sampson and Laub 1993). From that perspective, “strong attachment to a spouse ... combined with close emotional ties creates a social bond or interdependence between individuals” (Sampson and Laub 1993, p. 140) that raises the likely costs of crime for the individual concerned (Laub and Sampson 2003, Farrington and West 1995, Laub, Nagin and Sampson 1998).

Marriage can lead also to dramatic changes in personal lifestyle that lower the likelihood of crime. It can alter daily routines in ways that significantly reduce the opportunities to commit crime (Osgood and Lee 1993, Osgood et al 1996), most notably by reducing the amount of time that partners spend away from their homes. Moreover, marriage can also transform existing social networks in ways that reduce the likelihood that an individual will participate in crime. Married persons spend considerably less time in the company of their friends and are less inclined to have friends who are engaged in crime (Warr 1998). Thus, marriage may remove a key cause of crime from their lives.

Marriage can also bring an individual under the supervision and direct control of his or her spouse (Gibbens 1984; Laub and Sampson 2003). Many wives keenly monitor

the conduct of their husbands in an effort to curtail their risky health behaviors; indeed, the direct social control that spouses can exert over one another may explain much of the association between marriage and a range of physical and mental health outcomes (Umberson 1992). It is not surprising therefore that many spouses deliberately try to prevent their partners from engaging in crime or other antisocial activities that may increase their risks of involvement in crime (Laub and Sampson 2003).

Marriage also carries with it a number of social expectations regarding the roles and responsibilities of each partner and the assumption of these roles can have important ramifications for the ways that individuals think about themselves. In particular, marriage can lead to changes in identity (Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph 2002). Provided that the married individual recognizes that crime is incompatible with these roles or newly-acquired identities, marriage can help promote successful desistance from crime (Yamaguchi and Kandel 1985a, 1985b).

Of course, getting married, in and of itself, does not guarantee desistance. The effects of marriage on crime are likely to depend on an array of individual and relationship characteristics as well as the actions taken by the individuals involved (Laub and Sampson 2003; Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph 2001). For example, marriage only appears to reduce antisocial behavior among those who are married and living together (Farrington and West 1995; Horney, Osgood and Marshall 1995; Warr 1998). Separation may even lead to increases in crime (Farrington and West 1995; Horney, Osgood and Marshall 1995).

Perhaps the most widely-acknowledged factor that can account for differences in the effects of marriage is the quality of the marital relationship. In studies that control for the characteristics of the marriage, only those marriages that are marked by strong emotional attachment and commitment appear to prevent crime (Sampson and Laub 1993). Thus, Laub and Sampson (2003, p. 44) noted that “if the marriage is ... characterized by weak or non-existent attachment, continued offending will occur” (see also Sampson and Laub 1993; Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998). Indeed, “marriage alone may even increase crime” if it is dysfunctional (Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998, p. 234).

One point worth emphasizing is that attachment is often treated as a mediator in the causal chain that links marriage to desistance; that is marital status is assumed to

influence relationship quality which in turn alters the likelihood that the individual will engage in crime (Sampson and Laub 1993). A more reasonable interpretation, however, is that relationship quality moderates the impact of marriage on crime. From that perspective, crime is less likely to occur if the marriage is good. If the marriage is bad or is characterized by minimal emotional bonds between the husband and wife, then crime is likely to continue to occur.

This is likely for several reasons. First, the evidence that relationship status influences quality is not nearly as strong as the evidence that relationship quality influences marital status (Booth and Brown 1996; Brown 2001). Even if there are reciprocal links between attachment and marriage, in the sense that couples develop stronger emotional ties as a result of being married (Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998), attachment mediates the links between marriage and crime no more than marriage mediates the links between attachment and crime. Second, there are several mechanisms through which marriage is hypothesized to constrain crime (Laub and Sampson 2003), but each of these mechanisms is most likely to be effective in high-quality marital relationships. For example, direct supervision and monitoring is unlikely to be successful if neither spouse has invested emotionally in the other. In relationships marked by low levels of attachment, wives have very little incentive to spend time and energy monitoring the behavior of their husbands. Third, the idea that relationship quality moderates the effects of marriage on crime is more consistent with the terminology and the language used to describe the relevance of marital attachment in the literature. For example, as Laub and Sampson (2003, p. 44) note “if the marriage is ... characterized by weak or non-existent attachment, continued offending will occur”. Thus, in the absence of a high-quality relationship the effect of marriage on crime appears to be negligible.

### **Cohabitation and Crime**

Given the robustness of these findings, it stands to reason that analogous social relationships that expose individuals to similar social processes should also be precursors to successful desistance. Of these, cohabitation seems a likely candidate because, akin to marriage, it represents an intimate personal relationship marked by co-residence. From



the standpoint of desistance, intimacy in interpersonal relationships is important because it provides a basis for the development of emotional ties and mutual interdependence between partners. Co-residence is important because it leads to more opportunities for supervision and control, is likely to help change daily routines, and can distinguish the relationship from other forms of romantic association. Indeed, prior research has noted that, in the absence of co-residence, marriage does not affect involvement in crime (Farrington and West 1995; Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995; Warr 1998).

Some studies have, not surprisingly, illustrated the potential for non-marital cohabitation to serve as a catalyst for successful desistance (Shover 1983; Hughes 1998; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; Gadd and Farrall 2004). These studies, many of which were based on in-depth interviews with desisting offenders, indicate that in some cases, cohabitation leads to significant psychological and behavioral changes that ultimately result in disengagement from crime. For example, as one offender explained to Shover (1983, p. 213), “I started living with this woman ... and my life suddenly changed ... I was contented ... I cared about her ... That was it. [I stopped committing crime]”. In most cases, cohabitation appeared to operate in similar ways to marriage; specifically, cohabiting relationships gave offenders a reason to abandon crime, placed them under the supervision of partners who would not tolerate their continued involvement in crime and even provided them with the intellectual and emotional support required to maintain a conventional life in the face of adversity and seemingly omnipotent criminal temptations (Hughes 1998; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002).

As is the case with marriage, this research agenda also suggested that the mere existence of a relationship is not sufficient to encourage desistance. Many of the subjects in these studies had had other boyfriends and girlfriends in the past, some of whom they had lived with, but these relationships had been inconsequential for their involvement in crime (Hughes 1998; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002). The critical difference, it seems, between those relationships that resulted in behavioral change and those that did not, concerned the characteristics of the relationship and the individuals involved (Shover 1983; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; Hughes 1998). In particular, the degree to which individuals were open to change, the strength of emotional ties between them and their partners, and the extent to which their partners were opposed to their

involvement in crime were critical in determining the likelihood that the relationship would lead to desistance (Shover 1983; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; Hughes 1998; Gadd and Farrall 2004). Of these, the extent of attachment between partners and the emotional investments that they made in one another were especially important. As one reformed offender remarked to Hughes (1997, p. 149), “my girlfriend showed me that she did care ... She totally changed my life around”.

Although the results of these studies lend some credence to the notion that cohabitation also fosters desistance, it is not clear whether the cases reported in these studies represent isolated examples or manifestations of broader population trends. The problem is that qualitative studies may reveal eccentricities that are not reflected in the general population precisely because they are so focused on the specifics of individual cases. Thus, in some cases, desisting offenders might attribute their successful departures from criminal pasts to their de facto spouses, but those situations might be very rare. Instead, for most offenders, cohabitation may have no effect on criminal involvement.

The difficulty of making broad generalizations about the impact of cohabitation on desistance, based on the results of in-depth interviews with limited numbers of offenders, may also have been exacerbated by the fact that none of these studies sought to draw attention specifically to the impact of cohabitation on crime as distinct from the effects of intimate family relationships in general. In fact, in most of them, the terms cohabitation and marriage were used interchangeably as if both types of relationships can promote desistance and any differences between them were entirely artificial (Shover 1983; Hughes 1998; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002). While this lack of analytical precision may reflect a perception that the type of intimate relationship is not as consequential to desistance as the mere existence or characteristics of the relationship, it also makes it more difficult to draw any definitive conclusions regarding the crime-suppressing benefits of cohabitation on the basis of these results alone.

In any case, the results of large-scale quantitative analyses give little reason to think that cohabitation, in the absence of marriage, can contribute to desistance. To be sure, very few studies have tried to assess the independent effects of cohabitation on crime and many that have failed to distinguish it from other types of intimate relationships (e.g. Simons, Stewart, Gordon, Conger, and Elder 2000). Nonetheless, of

those studies that have examined the links between cohabitation and crime, only one has indicated that the experience of entering or being in a cohabitating relationship is associated with reductions in crime (Sampson, Laub, and Wimer 2006). In that study, Sampson, Laub, and Wimer (2006) observed that being in a cohabiting relationship was associated with reductions in criminal behavior and these effects were independent of time-stable differences in the likelihood of being in a cohabiting relationship.

Nonetheless, these results are contradicted by a number of studies indicating that cohabitation does not foster desistance (e.g. Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995). For example, Osgood, Horney, and Marshall (1995) investigated the impact of cohabitation on short-term changes in crime. They noted that short-term changes in marital status were associated with changes in criminal and delinquent behavior. Whereas marriage had a negative effect on crime, however, such that those people who married committed less crime than they had in the past, the opposite held for cohabiters. Relative to being married or single, entering a cohabiting relationship was associated with an increase in the expected rate of offending (Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995).

The quantitative research concerning the impact of cohabitation on analogous behaviors appears to undermine the claim that cohabitation promotes desistance even further. Some studies find evidence that both cohabitation and marriage are associated with reductions in alcohol consumption (e.g. Duncan, Wilkerson, and England 2003), but others suggest that cohabitation is positively associated with alcohol abuse (Horwitz and White 1998). It seems that cohabiters are more likely to report using marijuana and other controlled substances (Yamaguchi and Kandel 1985a, 1985b; Warr 1998), although this probably reflects the failure of cohabitation to promote desistance rather than the direct effect of cohabitation on marijuana consumption (Yamaguchi and Kandel 1985a, 1985b). In similar respects, several cross-sectional studies have observed that domestic violence is more prevalent within cohabiting relationships than in marriages (Stets and Straus 1991, Wilson, Daly, and Wright 1993, Wilson, Johnson, and Daly 1995, Brownridge and Halli 2002). Even if these differences are due to selection effects (Kenney and McLanahan 2006) they challenge the hypothesis that cohabitation fosters desistance.

Whereas the qualitative literature indicates that cohabitation may help promote desistance, therefore, on balance, the quantitative literature suggests otherwise. Even if

marriage has an important preventative effect on crime, cohabitation does not. There are perhaps two explanations for why cohabitation may have failed to emerge as significant predictors of desistance from crime. First, marriage and cohabitation may be qualitatively distinct states; that is, marriage and cohabitation may be far less similar than they appear and the differences between them may affect individual participation in crime in different ways. Second, both relationships may have the capacity to affect criminal involvement, but their effects may differ across the population. Depending on the distribution of the factors that moderate the links between adult family relationships and crime, in prior research, these differences may have reduced the average effects of cohabitation and parenthood. Thus, in statistical analyses, the effects of cohabitation on crime may often be obscured, whereas in studies based on in-depth interviews or life-history narratives, in which researchers are focused on specific examples rather than aggregate trends, the effects of cohabitation on desistance may be plain to see.

### **Cohabitation and Marriage**

Despite their apparent similarities, cohabitation and marriage are believed to differ in at least two important respects. First, cohabitation and marriage differ in terms of their legal standing (Nock 1995). Marriage constitutes a legally-binding set of obligations between individuals. By contrast, in most jurisdictions, cohabitation represents little more than an informal living arrangement, the terms of which are defined by the couple involved (Nock 1995). Differences in their respective legal statuses ensure that the costs of exiting a marital relationship are far more significant than the costs of ending of cohabiting relationship (Nock 1995). This difference, in turn, is thought to lead to the lower levels of commitment and relationship stability observed among the partners of cohabiting relationships (Teachman, Thomas, and Paasch 1991; Nock 1995; Stets and Straus 1991).

Second, cohabitation and marriage are also thought to differ in terms of the social norms that regulate them (Nock 1995). To some extent, these differences are thought to arise from the relative novelty of cohabitation. In that sense, it seems likely that the social mores regulating cohabiting relationships are less clearly defined than they are in

marriage. This lack of clearly-defined norms is reflected allegedly, for example, in the lack of an established vocabulary for cohabiting relationships and in less clearly-defined standards of conduct (Nock 1995). It is just as plausible, however, that social norms regulating conduct in cohabiting relationships have emerged, but that these are distinct from the behavioral standards that govern marriage. For example, Duncan, Wilkerson, and England (2003) speculated that the expectations that cohabiters have of their partners are different from the expectations that married people have of their husbands and wives and that these different expectations are then manifested in different standards of behavior. In any case, the point is that if marriage and cohabitation differ in terms of the social meanings and expectations that surround them, behavioral differences between married and cohabiting couples should emerge (Nock 1995).

Even if there are differences between marriage and cohabitation, in terms of their respective legal standings or the norms that govern them, however, from the standpoint of desistance, these differences matter only in so far as they affect the causes of crime. In order to demonstrate that marriage and cohabitation differ and that as a result of these differences cohabitation does not promote desistance to the same degree as marriage, it would be necessary to show that the two relationships differ in ways that are specifically relevant to the causes of crime and desistance. For example, it would be necessary to demonstrate that whereas marriage leads people to spend less time with their friends, as a result of normative or legal differences between the two relationships, cohabitation has not such effect on social network change. Alternatively, one might need to show how differences in the norms that govern cohabitation reduce the likelihood that couples in cohabiting relationships will supervise and control each other's behavior.

There is little direct evidence, however, that marriage and cohabitation differ in ways that relate to the perceived mechanisms of desistance. For example, the deleterious effects of marriage on social networks apply to other forms of intimate relationship, including cohabitation. Indeed, dating couples appear to have less contact with friends than those who are not romantically involved (Johnson and Leslie 1982; Surra 1985; Fischer et al 1989). Moreover, as these relationships escalate in seriousness, the individuals within them report more contact with the friends of their partners (Milardo 1982). Given that these research findings apply to couples in unmarried relationships,

patterns of peer association cannot account for differences in the ability of cohabitation and marriage to promote desistance from crime.

Whatever the legal or normative differences between cohabitation and marriage, trying to explain the failure of cohabitation to predict desistance by investigating possible differences between marriage and cohabitation may be premature. There is ample evidence that the effect of marriage on crime is not categorical and that it depends on an array of individual and relationship characteristics, including the strength of emotional attachment between spouses (Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998; Laub and Sampson 2003; Maume, Ousey, and Beaver 2005). And, as indicated in those qualitative studies that have highlighted the links between cohabitation and desistance, the same also appears to be true of cohabitation (e.g. Hughes 1998). In these studies, the importance of relationship quality is especially evident in the stories relayed by the respondents themselves. These studies suggest that under specific circumstances — namely, in relationships characterized by strong emotional ties — both cohabitation and marriage have the capacity to help steer offenders away from their lives of crime. The critical concern then is whether those conditions are satisfied.

Thus, an alternative explanation for why cohabitation does not appear to promote desistance is that it operates in much the same way as marriage, but its effects on crime have been overlooked because researchers have failed to take account of the factors that moderate its effects. To date, there has not been a single published study that has examined the extent to which the effects of cohabitation on crime depend on the characteristics of the relationship. This is a considerable oversight because one difference that researchers have consistently observed between cohabiting and marital relationships concerns the quality of those relationships (Nock 1995, Brown and Booth 1996; Brown 2003). People in cohabiting relationships report less relationship satisfaction, stability, commitment, more negative interactions than married couples (Nock 1995, Brown and Booth 1996). As a result, in studies that fail to take account of the conditioning influence of relationship quality, cohabitation appears to have no effect on desistance when, instead, it could just be that in most cases, levels of attachment are too low for the relationship to have an impact on individual involvement in crime.

This leads to the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 4.1: Individuals in high-quality relationships, whether married or cohabiting, will commit less crime than those who are not married or cohabiting.*

*Hypothesis 4.2: Those who enter high-quality relationships, whether married or cohabiting, will commit less crime than when not married or cohabiting.*

*Hypothesis 4.3: Those individuals in high-quality cohabiting relationships will commit as much crime as those in high-quality marriages (between-individual)*

*Hypothesis 4.4: Those entering high-quality cohabiting relationships will commit less crime, relative to when they were not cohabiting, as those in high-quality marriages, relative to when they were not married.*

It is important to note that the lower levels of relationship quality frequently observed among cohabiting couples are due, at least in part, to the processes influencing selection into and out of cohabitation as opposed to the experience of being in such relationships. Only 5 percent of cohabiting relationships endure for longer than five years; hence, most cohabiting relationships end in marriage or separation (Booth and Brown 1996). Of course, these patterns of selection out of cohabitation and into marriage are not random. Since most high-quality cohabiting relationships eventually become marriages, relationship quality among those couples who are intending to marry is comparable to that of married couples (Booth and Brown 1996). For those same couples, however, failure to marry is an important predictor of relationship instability (Brown 2003). Thus, as time goes by, unmarried men and women who expect to marry their partners report lower levels of confidence in the prognosis of their relationships. Overall, these patterns indicate that: first, relationship quality may play an important role in determining whether couples will marry or continue to cohabit; and second, as a result of this selection process, at any given time, a greater proportion of married than cohabiting couples will be in high-quality relationships.

Even if researchers can take account of the moderating effects of relationship quality, therefore, it is likely that the number of people in high-quality cohabiting relationships may be very small; so small, in fact, as to make it difficult to discern the effects of cohabitation on crime. More importantly, if relationship quality influences the

likelihood of cohabitation and marriage, then failure to model the process of selection into cohabitation could result in biased estimates of the causal effects of cohabitation on crime. Although resolution of these problems is beyond the scope of this chapter, they should be taken into account when interpreting the results of the analyses.

### **Data and Method**

To test the above hypotheses, I analyzed the results of the National Youth Survey pertaining to the 1,626 respondents who, as described in Chapter 3, who had participated in a least one of the last four publicly-available waves (i.e. 1979, 1980, 1983, and 1986). As described in Chapter 3, I measured desistance using a dichotomous indicator of self-reported criminal participation in one or more of the following offenses: drug sales, felony assault, felony theft, minor assault, minor theft, prostitution, and robbery. Thus, respondents were coded 1 if they had reported committing one or more of those offenses in the previous calendar year and 0 otherwise.

Marital status (cohabitation and marriage) was measured in terms of the living arrangements of respondents in the year before the survey was conducted, as explained in Chapter 3. Specifically, I classified respondents as married only if they were living with their spouses and if they had lived together for the majority of the previous year (coded 1 if married, otherwise 0). In similar respects, those who reported living with an intimate partner to whom they were not married for the majority of the previous year were classified as cohabiting (coded 1 if cohabiting, otherwise 0).

One disadvantage of relying on the living arrangements of respondents to measure marital status is that people whose relationships may have ended could still be classified as married or cohabiting. This is potentially a more significant problem for assessing the independent effects of cohabitation on crime because a sizeable proportion of cohabiting relationships are likely to end in marriage. To ensure that my classification method did not significantly alter the results of the analysis, I replicated all analyses using auxiliary measures of marriage and cohabitation. Respondents who lived with an unmarried partner at any point in the previous year were coded as cohabiting, irrespective of whether they married at a later stage, whereas married respondents were coded as such if they were



married at some point in the year but had not lived with an unmarried partner, any point, in the previous calendar year. The substantive conclusions of these analyses are the same as those reported below.

Each respondent to the 1979 and 1980 surveys, who reported being in either a cohabiting or marital relationship, was asked a series of questions about the nature of his or her relationship. Respondents were asked to indicate on a three-point scale how well they felt they were doing in terms of having a partner who was very affectionate and who shared a lot of their interests and activities (i.e. not well at all, OK, or very well). Using a five-point response scale, they were asked also if they felt their partners cared about them; whether their partners were willing to listen if they had a problem (i.e. strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree); how important they considered the activities they had done with their spouses or partners (i.e. not important, not too important, somewhat important, pretty important, or very important) and about how much influence they believed that their partners had over them (i.e. very little, not too much, some, quite a bit, and a great deal). To aid comparison, all responses were coded so that high scores indicated more intimate and supportive relationships and the items based on five-point scales were collapsed into three categories according to each respondent's percentile ranking on each item.

Together these items comprise *prima facie* indicators of several important aspects of relationship quality, as perceived by the respondent, including affection and warmth, support, involvement, and influence. In confirmatory factor analyses, conducted within each of the two survey years, these items loaded on a single factor. Average factor loadings were 0.68 and 0.70 in 1979 and 1980 respectively ( $\alpha=0.82$  and  $0.86$ ). From these items, I created a composite indicator of relationship quality by averaging respondent scores across the seven items. High scores indicate relationships that are characterized by higher levels of affection, support, involvement, and influence.

Respondents who were either married or cohabiting in the 1983 and in 1986 surveys were also asked about the quality their relationships. Specifically, they were asked to indicate how much warmth and affection they received from their partners and how much support and encouragement their partners had provided them. These items are comparable, though not identical, to those used to measure affection and support in the

earlier survey waves. As had occurred in 1979 and 1980, respondents were also asked to indicate how important they considered the activities they had done with their spouses or partners and about how much influence they believed that their partners had over them. In 1983 and 1986, respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they and their partners shared similar interests and activities. Exploratory factor analyses indicated that these items loaded on a single factor in the two survey years (i.e. average factor loadings were 0.77 in each year). In order to compare relationship quality levels in 1979 and 1980 to those in 1983 and 1986, each of these items was collapsed into a three-point scale based on each respondent's percentile ranking. These items were then combined by averaging respondent scores across the five items to create a 3-item measure of relationship quality, with high scores indicating the presence of a high-quality romantic relationship ( $\alpha=0.82$  and  $0.83$  in 1983 and 1986 respectively).

Since relationship quality is not observed for respondents who were not in a cohabiting or marital relationship, it is not possible to examine how quality moderates the effects of marriage and cohabitation on crime using multiplicative interaction terms. To get around this problem, I combined measures of marital status and relationship quality and classified respondents according to whether they were in a low-quality, medium-quality, and high-quality marriage or cohabiting relationship. First, all partnered respondents were classified as being in low-quality, medium-quality, or high-quality relationship according to their percentile scores on the continuous measure of relationship quality. Second, these three mutually exclusive categories were used to create six dichotomous indicators according to the marital status of the respondent: low-quality marriage; medium-quality marriage; high-quality marriage; low-quality cohabiting; medium-quality cohabiting; or high-quality cohabiting relationship. I also replicated the analyses reported below using alternative measures of marital status and relationship quality that incorporated either a selection of the relationship quality items described above or an expanded number of items. Since the results of these analyses confirm those reported below, it is unlikely that the findings of this chapter are sensitive to the measurement of relationship quality or the ways respondents were classified as being in low-, medium-, or high-quality relationships.

To test the four hypotheses, outlined earlier, I estimated a series of multilevel models in which time-periods were nested within individuals. The level-1 model is intended to account for individual changes in criminal behavior across the four waves of the survey (1979, 1980, 1983, and 1986). By contrast, the level-2 model is intended to explain time-stable differences in levels of offending between individual respondents. These models were estimated using logistic regression with random effects.

The level-2 or between-individual models included, as independent variables, measures of marriage and cohabitation in addition to sex (coded 1 if male, 0 otherwise) and two dichotomous indicators of ethnicity — Black and Hispanic. The indicators of marital status were entered as person-averages. For example, in the baseline models, I calculated each respondent's average score on the two dichotomous indicators of cohabitation and marriage in 1979, 1980, 1983, and 1986. In the extended analyses, I calculated each person's average score for each of the six dichotomous indicators of marital and cohabiting relationship quality across the four survey years. Thus, the results of the level-2 models yield some assessment of the links between the proportion of time spent in these relationships and between-individual differences in the likelihood of committing one or more offenses (Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995).

The level-1 models were intended to estimate the effects of cohabitation and marriage on within-individual changes in criminal offending. For each respondent, I calculated the difference between his or her time-varying indicator of marital status (or marital status and relationship quality) and his or her average score and included these deviation scores as independent predictors in the model. This approach provides estimates of the effects of cohabitation on involvement in crime that are unbiased by time-stable differences in individual characteristics (Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995, Brame, Bushway, and Paternoster 1999). In addition, the level-1 model includes controls for the effects of age — age and age-squared.

I conducted two different multilevel analyses — a baseline and extended analysis. In the baseline model, the effects of cohabitation and marriage were assessed without regard for the characteristics of either relationship. As a result, it assesses the overall relationships between cohabitation, marriage and crime. Since it utilizes comparable analytical methods and measurement strategies to earlier studies (Horney, Osgood, and

Marshall 1995; Sampson, Laub, and Wimer 2006), the results of the baseline analysis can be used to compare the overall effects of cohabitation across different samples. In the extended analysis, I included the indicators of the quality of cohabiting and marital relationships to assess the role of relationship quality in moderating their effects on crime. In particular, the results of the extended models provide a direct assessment of the impact of being in a high-quality marital or cohabiting relationship on within-individual changes in criminal and delinquent behavior.

## Results

Table 4.1 presents the results of the baseline model. Turning to the results of the time-stable predictors of criminal behavior, as can be seen, marriage is significantly related to between-individual differences in offending. Those persons who were married in all waves of the survey were, on balance, significantly less likely to commit an offense than respondents who were single in 1979, 1980, 1983 and 1986. In fact, they were roughly one-and-a-half-times more likely to abstain from crime than their single counterparts. By contrast, the amount of time respondents spent in cohabiting relationships appeared to have the opposite effect on between-individual differences in offending. Those respondents who were in cohabiting relationships for the full duration of the survey period were eight times as likely as those who never cohabited to commit an offense. Although these results could be due, in part, to unobserved differences in individual characteristics, the between-individual model results certainly do not provide any basis for inferring that cohabitation contributes to desistance from crime.

Of course, the more important test of the effects of cohabitation on crime concerns its effects on within-individual changes in criminal and delinquent behavior. These results too, however, provide little support for the idea that cohabitation can facilitate desistance. As can be seen, in the years in which respondents were in cohabiting relationships, they were not less likely to commit an offense than they were at times when they were not in cohabiting relationships. By contrast, the results of the baseline model of within-individual change provide further evidence that marriage is negatively associated with involvement in crime. Married respondents were significantly

less likely to report committing an offense in the years in which they were married. In fact, married respondents were roughly thirty-percent more likely to abstain from crime when they were married than when they were either single or cohabiting.

Overall, the results of the baseline model are consistent with previous research indicating that marriage can have a preventative effect on crime (Farrington and West 1995; Osgood, Horney and Marshall 1995; Warr 1998; Laub and Sampson 2003; Maume, Ousey, and Beaver 2005; Sampson, Laub, and Wimer 2006). They are also as consistent with the results of earlier quantitative studies, investigating the effects of cohabitation on crime, as is possible considering the contradictory findings of those studies (Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995; Warr 1998; Sampson, Laub, and Wimer 2006). Although some researchers have claimed that cohabitation can increase in crime for certain offenses (Horney, Osgood, and Marshall (1995), Sampson, Laub, and Wimer (2006) suggested that it has the opposite effect; that is, people in cohabiting relationships committed less crime while they were cohabiting than they did at other stages of their lives. The results obtained from the baseline model in Table 4.1 lie somewhere between these two extremes: they suggest that cohabitation neither increases nor reduces involvement in crime. Although people who spend more time in cohabiting relationships are more likely to be involved in crime, individuals entering those relationships are no more likely to commit crime while they are in cohabiting relationships than at other times.

Table 4.1 also contains the results of the extended model that included the combined indicators of marital status and relationship quality. These results indicate clearly that relationship quality moderates the links between marriage and crime in terms of between-individual and within-individual differences. Respondents in low-quality marriages were not less likely to be involved in crime than their single counterparts; indeed, those who were in low-quality relationships in all four surveys were almost twice as likely to have committed an offense in that period as the single or more happily-married respondents. Those who spent the years 1979, 1980, 1983, and 1986 in medium-quality or high-quality marriages, however, were significantly less involved in crime throughout the study period. Those in medium-quality relationships were approximately two times less likely to commit an offense than respondents who were single throughout

the same period, while those respondents who were in high-quality marriages in all four years were seven times less likely to be involved in crime.

In similar respects to the results of the baseline model, Table 4.1 also indicates that cohabiters are more likely to be involved in crime. Individuals in low-quality cohabiting relationships were significantly more likely to be involved in crime than single persons. Interestingly, the same applied to those who spent more time in high-quality cohabiting relationships: they were almost fifteen times as likely as the other respondents to report committing one or more offenses. Whether these results are due to time-stable differences between the individuals in cohabiting and marital relationships, on the basis of the between-individual results shown in Table 4.1, there is little evidence to infer that cohabitation promotes desistance from crime, irrespective of relationship quality.

As for the effects of marriage on changes in criminal and delinquent behavior, the results of the within-individual model provide clear evidence that relationship quality moderates the impact of marriage on crime. Respondents in low-quality marriages were just as likely to commit an offense while they were in such relationships as they did when they were not. However, those in medium-quality and high-quality marriages experienced significant reductions in their involvement in crime. In fact, respondents in medium-quality and high-quality marriages were almost two times as likely to desist from crime while they were in those relationships as they were at other times. Considering that these results relate to individual changes in criminal behavior over a seven-year period, such reductions are of considerable substantive significance.

Once again, however, the results indicate that cohabitation fails to deter involvement in crime, even among people in medium or high-quality relationships. Table 4.1 indicates that irrespective of the standard of the relationship, cohabitation had a negligible impact on within-individual changes in criminal and delinquent behavior. In fact, experiencing a high-quality cohabiting relationship appears not to influence criminal involvement any more than enduring a low-quality relationship does. People whose relationships were characterized by higher than average levels of warmth and affection and whose partners are more intensely involved in their lives were not less likely to commit crime while they were in those relationships than they at other times. In similar

respects, those whose partners were relatively callous and indifferent committed about the same number of offenses as they had when they were single.

Overall, these results provide only partial support for the first and second hypotheses that the experience of entering and maintaining high-quality cohabiting and marital relationships is associated with reductions in criminal behavior. The results presented in Table 4.1 indicate that relationship quality is an important moderating influence, but only with respect to marriage. Whereas medium and high-quality marriages can promote desistance, cohabitation does not seem to deter people from committing crime irrespective of how good their relationships may be. It should be noted that these differences are statistically significant; that is, even though medium-quality and high-quality marriages affect crime to roughly the same degree, in terms of their effects on crime, high-quality and medium-quality marriages would appear to be very different from high-quality and medium-quality cohabiting relationships. As such, Table 4.1 provides even less support for the third and fourth hypotheses that high-quality cohabiting and marital relationships affect crime in similar ways. It would appear that, even among good relationships, not all relationships are equal in their abilities to deflect people away from crime.

## **Conclusions**

Despite considerable evidence that marriage can foster desistance from crime, there is little evidence to support the claim that analogous family relationships can have the same kinds of effects. This especially seems to be the case with respect to cohabitation, which has often been described as being the most marriage-like institution. Some studies based on interviews with small numbers of offenders have observed a role for cohabitation in the desistance process, but the results of studies based on the analysis of large-scale surveys offer little support for the hypothesis that the crime-suppressing benefits of marriage also apply to unmarried cohabiting relationships. The contradictory results obtained from these empirical literatures presents an intriguing challenge to desistance researchers. Why should two complementary approaches to research yield such divergent results and how should scholars reconcile these findings? Does

cohabitation in the absence of marriage have the capacity to promote desistance and if so can it do so as effectively as marriage?

In broad terms, there are two possible explanations for why some types of family relationships may be more likely to affect desistance than others. First, it may be that many seemingly analogous social relationships are not as similar as they appear. In other words, despite some ostensible similarities, cohabitation and marriage could be fundamentally different social institutions. Second, it is possible that similarities between the effects of different adult family relationships are obscured by variations in their effects across the population. In particular, in light of the stated importance of attachment in explaining the links between marriage and desistance, it is plausible that the effects of cohabitation are contingent on the quality of cohabiting relationships. If so, researchers may have overlooked its impact on crime by studying its average relationship to crime or its average effect on individual changes in criminal behavior.

The results presented in this chapter offer very little support for the second of these two explanations. Although relationship quality moderates the effects of marriage, it has little impact on the relationship between cohabitation and crime. Irrespective of the level of attachment between partners, the experience of entering and maintaining a cohabiting relationship has no effect on an individual's involvement in crime. In fact, the only evidence that cohabitation has any implications for criminal and delinquent behavior is the finding that people who remain in cohabiting relationships for longer periods of time are more likely than others to be involved in crime and delinquency.

At the same time, the results presented in this chapter provide further support for the notion that the effects of marriage on crime are not categorical. Instead, as others have noted, the likely benefits of marriage are confined to those in good or very good relationships. Indeed, in so far as these results can be considered indicative of a causal relationship between marriage and crime, they imply that getting married is only likely to prevent crime if the relationship is in excellent or very good shape.

It should be noted, however, that marriage and cohabitation are not randomly occurring states. They are, instead, interdependent social relationships that reflect a series of conscious and unconscious choices that individuals have made. For many people, at certain points in their lives, marriage and cohabitation are viewed as alternatives to one



another. Although several factors may influence the decision to marry, it is likely that relationship quality plays an important part in the marriage calculus. People are more likely to marry if their relationships are good; that is, if they are characterized by such things as affection, intimacy, support, involvement, and commitment. There is also some evidence that relationship quality declines over time (Stafford, Kline, and Rankin 2004). Within cohabiting relationships, much of the decline in relationship quality appears to be attributable to couples that fail to marry in spite of the desire of at least one partner to do so (Brown 2003). At any point in time, therefore, a greater proportion of married people are likely to be in high-quality relationships than in cohabiting relationships.

Depending on the number of people in each relationship type, this could mean that the numbers of respondents in high-quality cohabiting relationships in each year of the NYS were too small to enable me to discern the effects of cohabitation on crime. Of greater concern, however, is the possibility that estimates of the effects of marriage and cohabitation, shown in Table 4.1, are biased due to the absence of one or more time-varying confounders (e.g. relationship quality) that raise the probability of marriage, while lowering the likelihood of crime and cohabitation (Hernan, Brumback, and Robins 2000; Robins, Hernan, and Brumback 2000). Merely including measures of these confounders in the model does not resolve the problem of bias (Robins, Hernan, and Brumback 2000); instead, its resolution requires a procedure that can account for the processes of selection into and out of cohabitation and marriage.

Since the use of such methods is beyond the scope of this dissertation, readers should be cautious in drawing definitive conclusions from the analyses presented in this chapter. It is possible that due to broad differences in the quality of cohabiting and marital relationships, I have underestimated the effects of entering a high-quality cohabiting relationship on desistance. At the same time, the consistency and clarity of the results reported in Table 4.1 should not be overlooked. Irrespective of the quality of the relationship, individuals who spend more time in cohabiting relationships are more likely to be involved in crime. In fact, even cohabiters in high-quality partnerships are significantly more inclined to commit crime. That even those in good cohabiting relationships are more involved in crime suggests that: first, the numbers of respondents in high-quality cohabiting relationships is not too small to discern its relationship to

crime; and second, irrespective of whether being in a cohabiting relationship actually causes a person to commit more crime, it does not cause him or her to desist from crime.

It appears, therefore, that there is something about marriage and its effects on crime that is unique and that does not apply to other seemingly analogous relationships. There are some important differences between marriage and cohabitation. Marriage and cohabitation are legally dissimilar and many commentators argue that the two types of relationship differ in other important respects (Nock 1995; Rindfuss and VandenHeuval 1990; Thomson and Colella 1992). Aside from aggregate differences between the personal characteristics of married people and cohabiters (Thomas and Colella 1992; Brown and Booth 1996), the two groups may also differ in terms of the meanings that they ascribe to their relationships and the expectations that they place on one another. Further studies should concentrate, therefore, on examining such differences and how they alter the social processes that operate within the two types of partnership.

More importantly, however, if such research can illuminate how the social processes operating in successful crime-suppressing relationships differ from those in less consequential partnerships, it could provide the means to understand, more fully, why marriage or any other seemingly beneficial social relationships can help foster desistance from crime. It is to this broader issue and the task of explaining why marriage promotes desistance that I turn in the next chapter.

**Table 4.1: Logistic Regression (with Random Effects) Desistance on Marriage and Cohabitation, 1979-1986**

	Model 1 (Baseline)	Model 2 (Extended)
Constant	3.84*** (1.19)	3.78*** (1.20)
<i><b>Within-Individual</b></i>		
Age	-0.43*** (0.12)	-0.42*** (0.12)
Age <sup>2</sup>	0.01** (0.00)	0.01** (0.00)
Cohabitation ( $\delta$ )	0.01 (0.22)	—
<i>Low-Quality</i>	—	-0.23 (0.31)
<i>Medium-Quality</i>	—	0.43 (0.39)
<i>High-Quality</i>	—	0.15 (0.41)
Marriage ( $\delta$ )	-0.27* (0.15)	—
<i>Low-Quality</i>	—	0.20 (0.20)
<i>Medium-Quality</i>	—	-0.56** (0.21)
<i>High-Quality</i>	—	-0.52** (0.24)
<i><b>Between-Individual</b></i>		
Male	1.72*** (0.12)	1.75** (0.12)
Black	-0.14 (0.16)	-0.12 (0.16)
Hispanic	0.36 (0.30)	0.36 (0.30)
Cohabitation	2.08*** (0.52)	—
<i>Low-Quality</i>	—	1.99** (0.73)
<i>Medium-Quality</i>	—	1.58 (1.11)
<i>High-Quality</i>	—	2.69** (1.12)
Marriage	-0.53** (0.23)	—

**Table 4.1 – continued.**

	Model 1 (Baseline)	Model 2 (Extended)
<i>Low-Quality</i>	—	0.68* (0.36)
<i>Medium-Quality</i>	—	-0.76* (0.44)
<i>High-Quality</i>	—	-2.03*** (0.46)
$\rho$	1.81	1.80
$\sigma$	0.50	0.50
N (observations)	5916	5916
N (cases)	1626	1626
Log likelihood	-3338.3	-3321.02

\*\* p < 0.10; \*\*\* p < 0.05; \*\*\*\* p < 0.01

## CHAPTER 5

As noted in Chapter 4, marriage is believed to suppress involvement in crime for at least four reasons: first, marriage helps establish informal social control of the individual; second, it promotes changes in his or her lifestyle which can help reduce his or her exposure to delinquent peers; third, marriage can subject the individual to direct social control; and fourth, it can help to transform his or her personal identity. Each of these explanations finds its origins in one of the six theoretical explanations of desistance, outlined in Chapter 2, and in three of those theories in particular: first, social control theory; second, social learning theory; and third, the theory of cognitive transformations. For example, the contention that adult family relationships foster desistance by strengthening the bonds between an individual and conventional society is clearly derived from social control theory and in particular, the age-graded theory of social control.

In most cases, the evidence that these mechanisms mediate the links between marriage and desistance comes from the results of in-depth interviews with desisting offenders (e.g. Laub and Sampson 2003; Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph 2002). These methods, though invaluable in terms of describing the kinds of changes that might accompany marriage and how they can promote disengagement from crime, provide little insight into which mechanisms operate most commonly. Moreover, only rarely have these explanations or the theories that describe how they operate been evaluated empirically. For the most part, researchers have opted, instead, to assess a single explanation or a single theoretical perspective at a time (e.g. Sampson and Laub 1993; Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998; Warr 1998; Simmons et al 2002; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002). As a result, most prior investigations that have sought to explain why marriage fosters desistance have failed to exclude rival hypotheses or ascertain their applicability across the population.

Those studies that have attempted to exclude rival explanations have been limited in the number of theories they could examine, looking at most at two theories at a time (e.g. Maume, Ousey, and Beaver 2005). More importantly, these studies have also exaggerated some of the differences between the theories of desistance, especially in terms of the predictions they make about marriage and crime, and so have often

overlooked important similarities in their empirical predictions (Warr 1998; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; Laub and Sampson 2003; Maume, Ousey, and Beaver 2005). As a result, prior research has, at times, claimed empirical support for one theory of another even when the evidence supported multiple interpretations. Others have chosen to subsume diverse perspectives into a single theoretical viewpoint. For example, Laub and Sampson (2003) argue that the distinct processes that link marriage to crime are, to a large extent, different manifestations of informal social control at the same time as acknowledging that marriage can affect criminal involvement through other means. Whatever the advantages of this approach to theoretical integration, it is difficult to see how one could claim to understand the links between marriage and desistance without knowing which of the numerous individual and social changes that can accompany marriage are most critical to helping an individual to move away from crime.

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the various mechanisms by which marriage is thought to promote desistance in order to determine which of these mechanisms plays the more prominent role in facilitating behavioral change. More broadly, in doing so, I aim to provide some insights into which of the many theories of desistance provides the most empirically plausible explanation of why marriage leads to the abandonment of crime. Not all of the desistance theories can be considered. For one thing, not all of them provide clear indications as to why life-course transitions such as marriage should promote behavioral change. Instead, I focus on the three theories in which life-course transitions and marriage, in particular, feature most prominently: social control, social learning, and cognitive transformation theories.

It is important to note that, at times, the processes described by these theories do overlap. A key step towards evaluating them, therefore, is to identify those empirical predictions that are common to all perspectives as well as those that are unique to each. As result of some identical empirical predictions and certain difficulties in measuring key concepts, at times, I am not able to test these theories definitively against one another. Nevertheless, even identifying these areas of overlap can extend our understanding of desistance. It helps ensure that key theories and the mechanisms they illuminate are not rejected, or others accepted, on the basis of evidence that supports multiple perspectives.

## **Marriage and Social Control**

One of the most frequently cited explanations for the empirical association between marriage and crime concerns the role of marriage in establishing the informal social control of the individual (Sampson and Laub 1993; Laub and Sampson 2003). This perspective, based on the age-graded theory of social control, contends that “strong attachment to a spouse ... combined with close emotional ties creates a social bond or interdependence between individuals that, all else being equal, should lead to a reduction in deviant behavior” (Sampson and Laub 2003, p.140). Close emotional ties do so primarily by establishing “interdependent systems of obligation and constraints that impose significant costs for translating criminal propensities into action” (Sampson and Laub 1993, p. 141). Put differently, marriage helps constrain crime because married individuals are less willing to incur the disapproval of their spouses or jeopardize the relationship through the continuation of their involvement in crime (see also Grasmick and Bursik 1990, Nagin and Paternoster 1994, Laub, Nagin and and Sampson 1998). Hence, attachment to spouses can help dissuade adults from engaging in crime for the same reasons that parent-child attachment constrains juvenile offending — it makes the spouse “psychologically present when the temptation to commit a crime appears” (Hirschi 1969, p. 88).

At the same time, Sampson and Laub (1993) also contend that the investments that individuals make in their interpersonal relationships are reciprocal and that such reciprocity can play a critical role in initiating changes in the individual’s behavior. These authors note that men and women who marry spouses with extensive criminal and delinquent pasts often take considerable risks in doing so in light of their checkered employment histories, their backgrounds of failed relationships, and their otherwise troubled pasts. For many individuals, these demonstrations of confidence and commitment may “trigger a return investment” in the relationship even to the point that they will desist from crime out of gratitude to their husbands or wives for having taken chances on them (especially if others had not been willing to do so) or out of a desire to vindicate the confidence that their husbands or wives may have shown in them (Sampson and Laub 1993, p. 141). Evidence of such reciprocity in marital relationships and its

relevance as a catalyst for behavioral change often emerges from in-depth interviews with desisting offenders. For example, as an ex-offender told Hughes (1997, p. 149), “my girlfriend showed me that she did care . . . She totally changed my life around [because she] showed me there actually are people who care”. In these cases, conformity may result from an unwillingness to disappoint a hopeful partner and a sense of obligation to justify his or her confidence as much as the fear of jeopardizing a highly-prized relationship.

As an explanation for why marriage promotes desistance from crime, the age-graded theory of social control and its associated concepts of “social capital” and mutual interdependence clearly emphasize the strength of attachment and emotional ties as being critical to the desistance process. As noted in Chapter 4, many studies treat attachment as a mediating factor in the causal process described by social control theory; that is, marital status influences relationship quality which in turn alters the likelihood that an individual will engage in crime. A more reasonable interpretation, however, is that the strength of emotional ties between partners moderates the impact of marriage on crime. In other words, crime is less likely to occur if the marriage is good. By contrast, if the marriage is bad or is characterized by minimal emotional bonds between the husband and wife, then crime is likely to continue to occur. This is likely for two reasons in particular. First, the evidence that relationship status influences quality is not nearly as strong as the evidence that relationship quality influences marital status (Brown2003). In fact, Laub, Nagin, and Sampson’s (1998) assertion that couples develop stronger emotional ties over time as a result of being married is inconsistent with the results of a sizeable body of research that shows that relationship quality actually declines in marriage over time (e.g. Stafford, Kline, and Rankin 2004). Second, as noted in Chapter 4, the idea that relationship quality moderates the effects of marriage on crime is more consistent with the terminology and language used to describe the relevance of marital attachment in the literature. For example, Laub and Sampson (2003, p. 44) note that “if the marriage is . . . characterized by weak or non-existent attachment, continued offending will occur” — a statement that very clearly conveys a conditional relationship. Moreover, the stronger the emotional bonds that characterize the relationship, the greater the expected benefits of marriage in



terms of changes in offending and the continuity of pro-social behavior (Sampson and Laub 1993, 2005).

To some extent, social control theorists, including the proponents of the age-graded theory of social control, have downplayed the importance of the characteristics or dispositions of the people to whom an individual is bonded in favor of emphasizing the strength of the relationship (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002). In fact, in their initial investigations, Sampson and Laub (1993) claimed that marital attachment was more important than any other relationship characteristic because “strong marital attachment inhibits crime and deviance regardless of that spouse’s own deviant behavior” (Sampson and Laub 2005, p. 169). This position has led some researchers to differentiate the age-graded theory of social control from other theoretical perspectives, including social learning theory, and to criticize it as giving insufficient consideration to the social orientations of partners (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002). There is, after all, some empirical evidence that challenges the claim that attachment is more important than the social orientations of partners (e.g. Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; Simmons et al 2002; Maume, Ousey, and Beaver 2005; Laub, Sampson, and Wimer 2006). If a person develops a loving and supportive relationship with an antisocial spouse, she or he is unlikely to abandon crime; instead, the most likely scenario is that the individual will continue to engage in crime and may even become more embroiled in a criminal lifestyle. As one of Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph’s (2002, p. 1048) respondents remarked, in describing her experiences in an attached relationship, “We used to do a lot of drugs together ... that was the basis of our relationship”.

Whatever its proponents may have written about the social orientation of partners, from the standpoint of social control theory it would be theoretically inconsistent to argue the social orientations of others are not crucial to the explanation of desistance. Social control theory holds that attachment makes the individual cognizant of and responsive to how his or her actions may affect the other party to the relationship and the kinds of reactions that such behavior may elicit. Within this framework, people refrain from committing crime as a result of marriage because they understand that their partners will disapprove of such transgressions and so they become wary that their continued involvement in crime will affect their partner or the relationship adversely. In the context

of juvenile delinquency, this implies that attachment matters only in so far as some “thought is given to parental reaction” (Hirschi 1969, p. 88). In similar respects, in marriage, the relevance of strong interpersonal attachment and emotional ties depends on the degree to which one partner realizes that, as one of Laub and Sampson’s (2003, p.135) respondents put it, the other “won’t put up with any baloney”.

In the absence of a conventional orientation, it should not be assumed that all spouses will always react unfavorably should their husbands or wives commit crime. High-quality marriages are only likely to promote changes in criminal behavior, if they bind the criminal or delinquent individual to a conventional spouse. Irrespective of how little emphasis social control theorists may have given to the social orientations of parents or partners, therefore, the degree to which an individual becomes attached to conventional others is critical to the internal logic of social control theory. The combined importance of attachment and social orientation to the integrity of the theory is especially important because it suggests that the typical analytical approach adopted by other researchers in assessing the age-graded theory of social control is inappropriate. Whereas others have tried to assess the relative importance of attachment and social orientation as if they were rival explanatory factors (e.g. Sampson and Laub 1993; Simmons et al 2002), the strength of the relationship and the degree to which the offender’s wife or husband approves or disapproves of crime should be seen as factors operating in tandem to moderate the impact of marriage on the probability that she or he will desist from crime. The combined importance of attachment and the social orientation of the partner as moderating factors can be expressed as the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 5.1: Those individuals who enter high-quality marriages to pro-social spouses will commit less crime.*

It should be noted that even though social control theory is the only theory that explains the marital effect in terms of strengthening the individual’s bond to conventional society, it is not the only theory that predicts that relationship quality and the social orientation of the partner should moderate the effects of marriage on crime. Hypothesis 5.1, therefore, is not inconsistent with other theoretical perspectives. In particular, social

learning theory also implies that among married men and women, high-quality marriage to a pro-social spouse should also play a direct role in their desistance from crime. As noted in Chapter 2, social learning theory contends that differential association is the principal arena in which learning takes place. Although social learning theorists tend to emphasize the importance of differential association with delinquent peers to the social learning process, the theory also acknowledges that marrying a pro-social spouse should provide differential reinforcement in the opposite direction. Those who think that “birds of a feather flock together” may dispute the theoretical significance of any empirical association between the social orientation of the spouse and the behavior of the individual (e.g. Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990), but disputing it merely overlooks the fact that from time to time flocks do fly out of formation. In those situations, even criminals can marry pro-social individuals and when they do, they can become more likely to abandon crime.

Whether any social relationship has an effect on individual behavior depends, according to social learning theory, on the frequency, priority, durability, and intensity of contact (Burgess and Akers 1966; Akers 1998). Since marriages are likely to lack temporal priority relative to association with social influences that support crime, the likelihood that marriage to a pro-social spouse will result in the abandonment of criminal behavior should be contingent on the frequency of contact between partners and on the intensity and the duration of the marital relationship. Thus, social learning theory also implies that relationship quality and the social orientation of the spouse will moderate the effects of marriage on crime. In empirical terms, therefore, it is difficult to distinguish the mechanisms of change implied by social learning theory from those suggested by alternative explanations for the effects of marriage on crime. Adjudicating between these competing perspectives will depend, in part, on the relative importance of the other mechanisms through which effective marriages might promote desistance.

### **Marriage and Exposure to Criminal Peers**

Marriage can lead also to dramatic changes in an individual’s lifestyle that lower the likelihood that she or he will continue to engage in crime. It can alter daily routines in ways that significantly reduce the opportunities to commit crime, most notably by

reducing the amount of time that partners spend away from their homes (Osgood and Lee 1993, Osgood et al 1996). Marriage can also have a profound effect on the individual's social network. In fact, as a result of marriage, many people spend considerably less time in the company of their friends and also spend less time with certain people (Kalmijn 2003). Given the central importance attributed to patterns of peer association in a number of criminological theories, such as social learning theory, it is not surprising that the tendency for many people to reconfigure their social circles as a result of marriage should explain, at least in part, its capacity to instigate behavioral change.

In a study of the relationship between marriage and desistance, Warr (1998) observed that married couples spent less time in the company of their friends than their single counterparts. He also noted that married persons were less likely to have friends who were themselves actively involved in crime and delinquency (Warr 1998). While these differences between single and married respondents could have been due, to some degree, to personal characteristics or attributes that preceded the marriage, Warr (1998) also presented evidence that changes in marital status predicted social network change. Moreover, since the celebrated empirical relationships between marriage and desistance disappeared in analyses that controlled for changes in the individual's exposure to friends and delinquent peers, Warr (1998) concluded that changes in the individual's social networks mediated the effects of marriage on crime.

These results are consistent with the social learning explanation for desistance and, in particular, with an explanation that focuses on differential association as being the principal means by which marriage can promote changes in criminal behavior (Warr 1998). From the standpoint of social learning theory, changes in patterns of peer association can have a profound impact on criminal behavior if it reduces the process through which criminal behavior is learned. Specifically, social learning theory would predict that it is differential association with delinquent peers that leads an individual to imitate their behavior and learn attitudes and techniques that support crime. It is also within such groups that crime and delinquency are socially reinforced (Warr and Stafford 1991; Akers 1998). Although Warr (1998) did not really explain why changes in the amount of time that married men and women spent with their friends (as distinct from the time they spent with delinquent friends) should also have led to their desistance, his

conclusion that changes in exposure to delinquent peers mediated the relationship between marriage and crime is consistent with the social learning explanation.

It should be noted that Warr (1998) did not explain why marriage should lead an individual to abandon systematically those friends who were actively engaged in crime. Perhaps readers were supposed to infer that anything that leads an individual to spend less time with his or her friends should, in the case of those involved in crime and delinquency, necessarily mean less time spent in the company of delinquent friends and to the subsequent atrophy of these relationships. In any case, the reasons why marriage can lead to such dramatic changes in the nature and composition of an individual's social networks are important. They are critical to the task of clarifying the role of marriage in the desistance process both in terms of explaining how and why it affects crime and in terms of specifying the circumstances in which it is most likely to alter patterns of peer relations and thereby promote disengagement from crime.

There is considerable evidence that, as a result of marriage, married persons experience significant changes in their social networks. Even though married persons have more friends than their single counterparts (Moore 1990), couples that have been married longer tend to have smaller friendship circles (Fischer and Oliner 1983). Longitudinal research studies indicate that these differences are the result of a process of network change that accompanies the formation of intimate relationships. In addition to experiencing decreases in both the number of friends and the amount of contact that they have with them, married couples also appear to increasingly encounter overlap in their friendship circles. As a result, married couples spend less time socializing with their old friends, are likely to share any remaining time they spend with friends in the company of their own partners, and are more likely to count the friends of their spouses as their own (Kalmijn 2003).

Two explanations have been offered to account for these changes: first, the competition hypothesis; and second, the balance hypothesis (Johnson and Leslie 1982; Kalmijn 2003). Proponents of the competition hypothesis maintain that friends and intimate partners perform similar functions and as such, are likely to compete for the time and attention of the individual (Johnson and Leslie 1982). The more serious the relationship, the more likely it is that the individual will choose to spend time with his or

her partner at the expense of others. Some couples may try to resolve these pressures by spending time with both partners and friends simultaneously, but in so far as competition among social networks is also likely to lead to competition among friends for the couple's attention, this is unlikely to resolve the problem. The end results are: first, most couples experience declines in their aggregate number of friends; second, each partner tends to spend less time in the company of his or her specific friends; and third, the time the couple spends with others will be shared with mutual friends (Kalmijn 2003).

The second explanation, the balance hypothesis, posits that antipathy between one partner and the friends of the other in an intimate relationship is likely to create internal tensions in the relationship that require an effective resolution (Parks, Stan, and Eggert 1983). Needless to say, individuals in such a position have the choice of abandoning the intimate relationship. They also have the choice of changing the nature of the discordant one. Those individuals who dislike their spouse's friends may try to learn to tolerate them, therefore, or they may compel their partners to discontinue the contested friendships (Parks, Stan, and Eggert 1983). The fact that couples may resolve these kinds of conflicts in a variety of ways suggests that the effects of marriage on social networks are not categorical. The balance hypothesis implies, in particular, that married couples are most likely to experience changes in their friendships circles only if spouse and friends do not get along. In such cases, one partner may be told: "Your friends or me", as one of Laub and Sampson's (2003, p. 136) respondents heard from his wife.

Each of these explanations implies that social networks should change in specific ways in response to the formation of marital relationships. More importantly, however, the competition and balance hypotheses clearly intimate that marriage should only affect friendships in ways that are consequential for the individual's involvement in crime and delinquency if the relationship is characterized by strong attachment to a pro-social spouse. Specifically, in the absence of either of these conditions, there is no reason to expect that marriage should either lead an individual to abandon his association with delinquent friends or to spend less time in their company.

For one thing, as I noted earlier, competition may lead people to try to see their friends in the company of their spouses, but it is least likely to resolve the challenges posed by competition if the spouse and friends do not get along. It stands to reason that a

wife who is strongly opposed to her husband getting involved in crime is unlikely to yield to his desire to spend time in the company of his criminal associates. Furthermore, as the balance hypothesis dictates, couples that experience considerable conflict between one spouse and one or more of the other's friends are subject to considerable tension within the family environment and it is this stress that encourages the individual whose spouse is in conflict with his or her friends to abandon one of the incompatible relationships. Spouses may disapprove of the friends of their partners for any number of reasons, but the only reason why their opprobrium should systematically target the delinquent friends of their partners is if they disapprove of what those friends are doing — namely, committing crime.

The competition and balance hypotheses also imply that marriage should only affect the importance and composition of social networks if the relationship is characterized by strong marital bonds. The problems implied by competition are less likely to arise in relationships in which neither partner is motivated to spend time with the other. And, in the absence of attachment and strong emotional commitments between partners, any conflicts that might arise between one spouse and the friends of the other are apt to be ignored or resolved through the termination of the intimate relationship. Men or women in low-quality relationships might just as easily respond to an ultimatum, such as “Your friends or me”, by choosing their friends. It follows that marriage to a pro-social spouse is not a sufficient stimulus for an individual to withdraw from friendships with criminal peers. Instead, the likelihood that marriage will restructure the offender's peer relationships in ways that systematically reduce his or her exposure to criminal friends is conditional on the social orientation of the spouse and the quality of the marital relationship. This can be expressed as the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 5.2: Those individuals who enter high-quality marriages to pro-social spouses will have fewer friends who commit less crime. Among active offenders, those individuals who reduce their exposure to delinquent friends will be less likely to commit crime.*

It should be noted, however, that negative correlations between marriage and exposure to delinquent peers and between criminal peer exposure and crime “does not mean that social learning explanations are necessarily correct; rather, peer relations are important in structuring routine activities and opportunities for crime over the life course” (Laub and Sampson 2003, p. 38). Marriage to a conventional partner could just as easily affect the individual’s involvement in crime and delinquency because it exposes him or her to increased supervision and control and, in doing so, restricts his or her opportunities to commit crime. In other words, the empirical implications of the social learning explanation for the relationship between marriage and desistance are not inconsistent with alternative theoretical perspectives. Introducing attachment as a moderating factor does not help distinguish between these competing explanations because, as I have already noted, social learning theory presupposes a strong emotional bond between partners. For the same reason, acknowledging that the effects of marriage on exposure to delinquent peers are conditional on the social orientation of the spouse also fails to distinguish the mechanism described by social learning theory from that presumed by other explanations.

One notable and useful exception to these overlapping predictions concerns the potentially mediating role of the individual’s attitudes toward crime. In contrast to social control theory, social learning theory predicts that exposure to criminal friends affects the individual’s involvement in crime, in part, because she or he is likely to acquire, from those friends, attitudes that are favorable towards crime. That is not to say that attitudinal change is the only means or even the primary mechanism through which individuals learn criminal behavior — exposure to delinquent peers appears to affect involvement in crime independently of its effects on attitudinal change (Warr and Stafford 1991). Nonetheless, it is the acknowledgement that attitudinal change is an integral part of crime causation that distinguishes the social learning explanation from other theoretical perspectives and from social control theory in particular (Hirschi 1969, Jensen 1972; Kornhauser 1978; Matsueda 1982). Just as the role of attitudes as a mediating factor in delinquency causation has been used by other researchers as the “basis for empirically testing the comparative efficacy of the two theories” (Matsueda 1982, p. 490), it can also be used to evaluate competing explanations of the effects of marriage on desistance. This means that



if part of the impact of changes in exposure to delinquent peers on crime is mediated by changes in the individual's attitudes towards crime, then it is possible to rule out the claim that marriage fosters desistance entirely through its suppression of criminal opportunities. Thus, hypothesis 5.2 can be supplemented with the following testable hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 5.3: Those individuals who reduce their exposure to delinquent friends will become less supportive of crime. Among active offenders, those individuals who become less supportive of crime will be less likely to commit crime.*

### **Marriage and Direct Social Control**

Marriage can also bring an individual under the supervision and direct control of his or her spouse (Gibbens 1984; Laub and Sampson 2003). Many wives keenly monitor the conduct of their husbands in an effort to curtail their risky health behaviors and the direct social control that spouses can exert over one another is believed to help explain much of the association between marriage and a range of physical and mental health outcomes (Umberson 1992). It is not surprising therefore that many spouses deliberately try to prevent their partners from engaging in crime or engaging in other antisocial activities that may increase their risks of criminal involvement (Laub and Sampson 2003).

In some cases, men and women may intervene in the lives of their partners specifically to preclude them from engaging in crime. For example, as the wife of one desisting offender explained to Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph (2002, p. 1046), “[His friends] know not to bring it [stolen property] here... and they know we won't have any of that. I don't want them bringing nothing hot to my house”. In other cases, however, the overall objective of conformity may be achieved less directly by circumscribing the individual's opportunities to engage in crime. This can occur as wives and husbands try to restrict the amount of time that their spouses spend going out, preclude them from spending time with certain friends (who are deemed to be bad influences), or monitor and control their drinking (Gibbons 1984; Laub and Sampson 2003). In fact, often spouses exert the greatest amount of control on the partners'

relationships with others; that is, men and women may control the behavior of their partners by restricting the amount of time that they can spend socializing with their friends or by seeking to change the types of people with whom they spend their time. As another one of Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph's (2002, p.1049) respondents noted, "I don't let her go out and drink with her fat little girlfriends no more".

This implies, of course, that the link between marriage and crime should be mediated also by changes in lifestyle, especially reductions in an individual's exposure to delinquent friends. More broadly, however, as an explanation for why marriage fosters desistance, the concept of direct social control implies that the empirical relationship between marriage and crime should be mediated, at least in part, by the amount of control that the partner attempts to impose and the degree to which the individual is subject to it.

The amount of control that spouses impose on their partners and the success that they have in doing so is likely to depend on a number of factors including the perceived propensity of the other partner to engage in crime. Both the extent and success of control should also depend, however, on the level of attachment between partners and the extent to which the controlling spouse disapproves of crime. In relationships marked by low levels of attachment, wives have very little incentive to spend time and energy monitoring the behavior of their husbands. The same principle has been applied to parental supervision of children: parents who are unattached to their children have few incentives to monitor and control their behavior (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). At the same time, the men and women who are subjected to direct social control at home have little incentive to tolerate it or abide by it if they are not attached to their partners. And for essentially the same reasons why only marriage to pro-social spouses is likely to result in the loss of criminal and delinquent friendships, spouses are most likely to intervene in the lives of their partners in ways that constrain their opportunities to commit crime if they disapprove of such behavior. Accordingly, only marriages to pro-social partners that are characterized by a high degree of attachment should promote the kind of social control that can lead to an individual's disengagement from crime. Hence, another hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 5.4: Those individuals who enter high-quality marriages to pro-social spouses will be exposed to increases in direct social control. Among active offenders, those individuals who are exposed to increases in direct social control will be less likely to commit crime.*

As an explanation for why marriage encourages desistance, the concept of direct social control arises from social control theory; it implies that, in the absence of the constraints imposed by husbands or wives, most offenders would continue to commit crime<sup>2</sup>. However, the expectation that the link between marriage and crime should be mediated partly by changes in an individual's exposure to delinquent friends is also consistent with social learning theory. This is especially important because it suggests that demonstrating that increased supervision and monitoring can promote disengagement from crime is not sufficient proof of the social control theory version of desistance. Even if marriage promotes social network change *solely* because one spouse deliberately seeks to engender it, if the link between direct social control and desistance is mediated, in part, by changes in patterns of peer association, social learning theory cannot be excluded.

The critical difference between these competing perspectives, of course, concerns the influence that social and pro-social friends have on the individual's behavior. Since social control theory assumes that the motivation to commit crime is always present, its explanation for the effects of marriage on crime focuses on sources of constraint; hence, changes in delinquent peer exposure reduce opportunities to engage in crime among criminally-prone individuals. By contrast, social learning theory posits that changes in behavior result from interruption to the social learning process; specifically, the removal of the individual from social situations in which criminal behavior is reinforced and his or

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<sup>2</sup> Initially, Sampson and Laub (1993, p. 141) were skeptical of the potential of marriage to promote change among adult offenders by subjecting them to increased controls, noting that "it is unrealistic to expect that adults with a criminal background ... can be wholly transformed by institutions ... or that such institutions are even capable of imposing direct controls like surveillance". However, they observed first-hand evidence to the contrary as several successfully desisting offenders described the very active roles that their wives had taken in reforming them (Laub and Sampson 2003).

her increased exposure to situations in which conventional behavior can be imitated and socially reinforced. However, as noted earlier, the empirical implications of these two perspectives are very similar and, as such, it may not be possible to decide between them.

### **Marriage and Individual Identity**

Marriage may also facilitate desistance by helping offenders change how that they think about themselves. As noted in Chapter 2, changes in self-perception are considered important precursors of successful desistance and feature prominently in a number of theories of desistance, especially the theory of cognitive transformation (e.g. Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002). These perspectives are distinguished by their common belief that desistance is considerably more likely to occur if desisting offenders cease to think about themselves as criminals or delinquents and can, instead, redefine themselves as conventional, law-abiding individuals. Although any number of life-changes might initiate changes in self-perception, life-history narratives also suggest that for many offenders the abandonment of criminal or deviant identities are often helped by marriage (Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph 2002).

These changes in self-perception are considered important for a number of reasons. Pro-social identities can provide organizing concepts that enable desisting offenders to help make sense of their lives, including how to reconcile their criminal histories with their conventional futures (Maruna 2001; Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph 2002). The assumption of a “new or refashioned identity can [also] act as a cognitive filter in decision-making” (Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph 2002, p. 1001). In that sense, identity change can help alter how desisting offenders think about crime and the extent to which they are prepared to act on criminal opportunities that may arise.

The cognitive transformation approach contends that changes in identity are most likely to foster desistance if they are accompanied by fundamental shifts in the perceived viability and legitimacy of criminal behavior. As Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph (2002, p. 1001) note, the assumption of a pro-social identity is most likely to help sustain desistance if it leads the desisting offender to consider it “inappropriate for ‘someone like me’ to do ‘something like that’”. To give up on crime, in other words, requires that the

offender sees crime as being undesirable and incompatible with his or her newly acquired pro-social identity and “the desistance process can be seen as relatively complete when the actor no longer sees these same behaviors as positive, viable, or even personally relevant” (Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph 2002, p. 1002). Thus, the empirical implication of the cognitive transformation theory is that changes in personal identity affect crime through their effects on the individual’s attitudes.

More particularly, the principal means by which marriage can contribute to changes in self-concept that can, in turn, support or encourage the individual’s movement away from crime is through role socialization (Yamaguchi and Kandel 1985a, 1985b). Role socialization occurs when people adopt attitudes and modes of behavior that are known to be compatible with their newly acquired roles as husbands or wives. Marriage carries a number of social expectations regarding the roles and responsibilities that husbands and wives should assume, just as other life-course transitions are governed by normative expectations that define behavior that is considered appropriate to those positions (Nock 1995). In the case of marriage, normative behavioral expectations can include, among other things, some commitment to living within the confines of the law (Yamaguchi and Kandel 1985b).

In theoretical terms, role socialization is considered a typical response to role conflict or role incompatibilities; that is, situations in which “the demands of a social role are incompatible with a pattern of behavior” (Yamaguchi and Kandel 1985a, p. 1286). These conflicts can be resolved in one of two ways: first, by abandoning the role or delaying entry into it; or second, by “relinquishing the incompatible behavior or preventing its appearance” (Yamaguchi and Kandel 1985a, p. 1287). Given that involvement in crime contravenes the normative expectations that govern marital roles, active offenders who marry are likely to experience role conflict and accordingly are likely to abandon crime so as to minimize such internal conflicts (Yamaguchi and Kandel 1985a, 1985b). Thus, according to the theory, marriage encourages desistance because active offenders realize that their involvement in crime contravenes their roles as husbands or wives.

As an explanation for the link between marriage and desistance, the concept of role socialization is based on a number of assumptions that may, in the context of active

offenders, seem inappropriate. The theoretical mechanism described above presumes that everyone is necessarily inclined to minimize role incompatibility if it occurs (Goode 1960). Since it requires married offenders to recognize that their behavior is incompatible with their marital responsibilities, it presumes also that an individual is cognizant of the social norms and behavioral expectations that govern marriage. Such recognition may not come naturally to all people, however, especially those who, as children in their own families, may have observed their mothers and fathers as criminal or delinquent husbands and wives. More importantly, the fundamental assumption of role socialization is normative consensus: it presumes that people respect and respond to the social norms pertaining to specific roles. Almost by definition, however, active offenders have shown little compunction about violating a number of conventional social norms.

That is not to say that marriage cannot promote desistance through role socialization, but it might suggest that, other individuals need to take more of an active role, as far as offenders are concerned, if marriage is to contribute to behavioral change. Despite the expectation that people abandon inappropriate behaviors, purely in response to assuming the identity of a husband or wife, it seems more likely that they do so with the aid of their partners. Thus, as Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph (2002) note, partners can provide positive role models for how to live a conventional life and how to live in a manner that is consistent with a given social role. In addition, spouses can provide some positive reinforcement for desisting offenders who have adopted pro-social identities and in doing so can help make their self-concept seem more credible.

Whether spouses are able to affect such changes and whether they are likely to lead to desistance surely depends on the nature of the relationship and the partners involved. Spouses who condone crime are not likely to be exemplars of how to live a conventional life. And, just as active offenders should not be expected to acknowledge or respond to conventional social norms regarding marriage it seems implausible that in the absence of a conventional orientation spouses are able to provide the impetus required for effective role socialization to take place. At the same time, as I have argued already, spouses are most likely to influence the behavior of their partners when they are strongly attached to them and so it also follows that marriage is more likely to support the adoption of a conventional identity and the abandonment of a delinquent identity if the

emotional ties between partners are intense. This leads to the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 5.5: Those individuals who enter high-quality marriages to pro-social spouses will be more likely to adopt pro-social identities. Among active offenders, those individuals who adopt pro-social identities will be less likely to commit crime.*

The concept of role socialization implies that marriage entails a broader transformation of personal meaning and purpose. Thus, in assuming the roles of husbands and wives, married people abandon behaviors that are deemed inconsistent with those roles and adopt new behaviors that are considered critical to that role. If correct, married offenders should not only desist from crime, they should also become more conventional in terms of their attitudes, aspirations, and objectives. Of course, as stated earlier, these changes cannot be expected to take place automatically as a result of marriage; instead, the effect of marriage on conventional aspirations and desistance is likely to be contingent, once again, on the social orientation of the spouse and the quality of the marital relationship. This leads to the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 5.6: Those individuals who enter high-quality marriages to pro-social spouses will place greater emphasis on conventional goals and aspirations. Among active offenders, those individuals who place greater emphasis on conventional goals aspirations will be less likely to commit crime.*

The six hypotheses listed above are intended to evaluate the four specific mechanisms through which marriage is thought to foster criminal desistance. They are also expected to provide some clarification as to which of the three theories of desistance offers the most accurate description of how and why these mechanisms operate. From the preceding discussion it should be apparent that, as far as the relationship between marriage and desistance is concerned, the major theories of desistance make a number of overlapping predictions. Nonetheless, it is possible to isolate a number of key empirical questions, the answers to which can be used to help adjudicate between these competing perspectives at the same time as improving our understanding of the mechanisms that

link marriage to desistance from crime. These can provide critical tests of those theories.

First, are the effects of marriage on crime contingent on the social orientation of the spouse and the quality of the marital relationship? In Chapter 4, I observed strong support for the contention that only strongly attached marriages promote desistance. Despite the claims of some researchers, that when applied to study the links between marriage and desistance the major theories differ in terms of the relative importance they place on social orientations and marital attachment, all three theories and all four mechanisms imply that both relationship characteristics should moderate the marriage effect. Hence, some insight can be gained simultaneously into the empirical viability of the three theories — social control, social learning theory, and the theory of cognitive transformations — by examining that basic proposition.

Second, taking into account the conditional nature of the marital effect, does marriage have a direct effect on desistance controlling for its effects on patterns of delinquent association, the individual's social orientation, and his or her personal identity? Evidence of a direct marital effect is consistent with the explanations offered by social control theory and social learning theory. Although it is most often associated with social control theory, finding evidence of a direct (conditional) marital effect would imply that neither the argument that marriage fosters change by establishing bonds of interdependence between partners or the contention that marriage exposes offenders to the imitation and differential reinforcement of pro-social behavior can be excluded.

Third, do changes in patterns of peer association mediate the effects of marriage on crime? If so, are the effects of changes in peers on crime, partially mediated by changes in the individual's attitudes towards it? Even though social learning theory predicts that much of the impact that criminal peers will have on an individual's behavior should occur through the differential reinforcement that they provide, even if changes in patterns of peer association mediate the effects of marriage on crime that does not mean that the social learning interpretation is correct. Changes in the social networks of individuals could promote desistance merely by reducing the opportunities available to the individual to commit crime. Hence, it would only be possible to exclude an explanation that focuses on changes in criminal opportunities, as in the case of the social control theory interpretation of how marriage constrains crime through direct social



control, if the links between peer associations and crime were mediated entirely by attitudinal change.

Fourth, does attitudinal change mediate the links between establishing a high-quality marriage to a pro-social spouse and if so, is that relationship explained by changes in identity, including increased interest in conventional goals and aspirations? Both social control theory and the theory of cognitive transformations emphasize the importance of attitudinal change; that is, both theories imply that marriage leads an individual to adopt a more pro-social orientation. However, these two perspectives differ significantly in terms of the kinds of changes that precipitate attitudinal change. In the case of social learning theory, a high-quality marriage to a conventional spouse should have a direct effect on attitudinal change. It should also have an indirect effect, as just noted, that is mediated by changes in the individual's exposure to criminal friends. By contrast, the theory of cognitive transformations and related perspectives emphasize the combination of identity and attitudinal change. Thus, changes in self-concept should mediate any links between the realignment of the individual's attitudes toward crime and desistance.

### **Data and Method**

To test the above hypotheses, I analyzed the results of the National Youth Survey for a sub-sample of the 1,626 respondents used in Chapter 4. Analyses were based on responses to the 1980 and 1983 surveys and were restricted to respondents who had reported committing one or more offenses in 1980 and had been neither married or cohabiting at the time that survey had been conducted. The resulting sample represents those respondents who committed one or more drug sale, felony assault, felony theft, minor assault, minor theft, prostitution, robbery or public disorder offenses and had not lived the majority of the previous year with a spouse or partner. This yielded a total sample of 550 respondents aged between 18 and 24 in 1983.

These analyses provide an opportunity to examine the effects of changes in marital status on changes in criminal and delinquent behavior between 1980 and 1983 as a large proportion of respondents were making the transition from adolescence into early adulthood. I examined also the effects of changes in marital status on criminal behavior

between 1983 and 1986. The results of these analyses confirm the patterns reported below. The main reason for restricting the analyses to the final stages of the publicly-available survey is that survey items pertaining to the social orientations of partners were only introduced to the survey in 1983. As such, by focusing on changes in marital status from 1980 to 1983, I can examine the proposition that the effects of those changes are conditional on the social orientation of the spouse.

Given that the analyses are restricted to a sample of active offenders, to measure desistance, I used the indicator of crime described in Chapter 3 to measure desistance. Thus, respondents who reported committing one of more offenses in 1983 (coded 1 if committed an offense, otherwise 0) did *not* desist from crime, whereas those who reported committing no offenses can be classified as having desisted, albeit in the short-term. And, since the sample is also confined to respondents who were not married in 1980, I measured changes in marital status in much the same way. Hence, those who were coded as married or cohabitating in 1983 represent respondents who entered marital or cohabiting relationships between the completion of the 1980 and 1983 surveys<sup>3</sup>.

To measure relationship quality, I used the list of relationship quality items that were included in the 1983 survey as described in Chapter 4. Respondents were asked to indicate how much warmth and affection they received from their partners, how much support and encouragement their partners had provided them, how important they considered the activities they had done with their spouses or partners, and about how much influence they believed that their partners had over them. In addition, they were asked how much they and their partners shared similar interest and activities. These items were combined by averaging respondent scores across the five items. Respondent scores ranged from 1 to 5 with high scores indicating the presence of relationships marked by

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<sup>3</sup> This approach could underestimate the impact of marriage on crime because it excludes those married respondents who had been cohabiting in the previous survey. Alternatively, it might overstate the effects of marriage if, contrary to the results obtained in Chapter 4, high-quality cohabitating relationships actually can promote desistance. In any case, as the results of Table 5.1 indicate, there is considerable correspondence between the estimated impact of changes in marital status obtained in these analyses and those reported in Chapter 4 based on a larger and less restricted sample of respondents.

attachment and emotional ties.

Respondents were asked how they thought their spouses or partners would react if they were to steal something worth less than \$5, sell hard drugs, use marijuana, steal something worth more than \$50, hit someone, destroy property, or break into a vehicle. Their answers were recoded on a 5-point scale that ranged from strongly approve to strongly disapprove with neither approve nor disapprove in the middle. Exploratory factor analyses, conducted with all respondents who were living with or married to a spouse or partner, indicated that these seven items loaded on a single factor, with average loadings of 0.78 ( $\alpha=0.87$ ). These items were averaged to create an index of spousal approval for criminal and delinquent behavior, with high scores indicating respondents who believed that their spouses were more supportive of crime.

As noted in Chapter 4, information on relationship characteristics, including the attitudes of spouses, is not observed for respondents who were not married or cohabiting. Accordingly, to examine how these attributes moderate the effects of marriage on crime, I combined measures of marital status, relationship quality, and the social orientations of spouses. In similar respects to Chapter 4, all partnered respondents were classified as being in low-quality or high-quality relationships based on their percentile rankings on the relationship score. I then did the same thing for the social orientations of spouses; that is, I classified each respondent's spouse as having anti-social or pro-social attitudes based on the respondent's percentile ranking. These two sets of categorical indicators were combined with marital status to create dichotomous indicators of relationship quality and spousal social orientation for both married and cohabiting relationships.

To ascertain the degree to which respondents considered crime to be an acceptable means to achieve their objectives, I constructed a summary measure of their attitudes to the same offenses that were used to measure the social orientations of spouses. Exploratory factor analyses indicated that these measures probably summarize two reasonably distinct dimensions of criminal attitudes: attitudes to illegal service or public order offences and attitudes to crimes of a more serious nature. Nonetheless, confirmatory factor analyses suggest that these items could be combined with average factor loadings of 0.73 in 1980 and 0.72 in 1983 ( $\alpha = 0.80$  and  $0.81$  respectively). Changes in attitudes toward crime, in general, are more likely to result in successful

desistance than piecemeal shifts in attitudes to specific offences or types of offences. Moreover, the more comprehensive the measure of criminal attitudes, the more likely it is to help differentiate those morally inflexible respondents from those for whom the iniquitousness of crime is a contextually dependent variable. These items were then averaged to create a summary measure of criminal and delinquent attitudes with high scores indicating respondents holding attitudes that were more favorable to crime. So as to capture attitudinal change, I calculated the difference between each respondent's attitudinal scores in 1980 and 1983. Thus, positive values indicate an increase in support for crime.

For each respondent, I calculated the average number of their friends who, according to the respondent, had stolen something worth less than \$5, sold hard drugs, used marijuana, stolen something worth more than \$50, hit someone, destroyed property, or broken into a vehicle. These are the same offenses covered by the measures of delinquent attitudes and the social orientations of spouses. Again, exploratory factor analyses supported the inclusion of these items in a single measure with average factor loadings of 0.71 in 1980 and 0.70 in 1983 ( $\alpha=0.75$  and  $0.77$  respectively). Scores ranged from 1 to 5. This scale, which provides an indicator of exposure to delinquent peers, is coded so that high scores indicate respondents with a large number of friends who are actively involved in crime. As with the measure of attitudinal change, to observe changes in exposure to delinquent peers I merely subtracted the earlier score from the most recent so that positive values indicate an increase in the average number of criminal or delinquent friends.

The NYS does not include measures of the degree to which an individual thinks of himself or herself as being a criminal or a delinquent. However, the survey does include indicators of how respondent feel they are perceived by others including, in 1980 and 1983, how they think they are seen by their parents. Measures of the reflected appraisals of parents and other significant others are used often as indicators of an individual's own identity. Certainly, in the tradition of symbolic interactionism, if others consider the individual to be a criminal or delinquent, then, according to most accounts, the individual will also see himself or herself in the same way (Matsueda 1992; Heimer and Matsueda 1994). Other factors might ameliorate the effects of negative reflected

appraisals even by parents or close acquaintances on an individual's own sense of identity, but whatever the conceptual distinction between the impressions that other people form of an individual and his or her own self-perception (e.g. Lofland 1969), in the empirical literature, such distinctions are rarely made.

Hence, in an effort to empirically evaluate the theory of cognitive transformations and its explanation for why marriage might promote changes in criminal behavior, it seems reasonable to use the reflected appraisals of others as a proxy for an individual's own identity. To that end, I used several survey items which asked respondents how much they thought that their parents would agree that they were bad people, that they broke rules, got into trouble, and did things against the law. The original response categories ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree. In exploratory factor analyses, these items loaded on a common factor, with average loadings of 0.75 and 0.78 in 1980 and 1983 ( $\alpha = 0.85$  and  $0.87$ ). Accordingly, I averaged the four items to create a summary measure of criminal or delinquent identity, with high scores indicating a delinquent appraisal. Changes in the measure were recorded the same way as the other indicators: I took the difference between the 1980 and 1983 scores. Negative values denote some movement away from a delinquent identity and toward a pro-social one.

Support for conventional goals and aspirations were measured using a single indicator of how much importance respondents placed on having a good job or career. Responses were scored using a 3-point scale ranging from not important to very important. Change in conventional aspirations was measured using a dichotomous indicator, based on the difference between each respondent's 1983 and 1980 scores (coded 1 if respondents placed greater emphasis on conventional careers goals than they had previously and 0 otherwise).

It should be noted that the NYS did not include any indicators that could be used to directly test the effects of spousal supervision and control on desistance and as a result it is not possible to evaluate all four mechanisms described earlier. Nonetheless, the remaining measures provide the opportunity to test the theoretical premises that are thought to underpin the effects of supervision and control in addition to the other social processes that are thought to link marriage and desistance. The analyses presented here were conducted using logistic regression and ordinary least squares regression analysis,

with desistance as the dependent variable in most analyses.

## Results

Table 5.1 shows the estimated effects of marriage and cohabitation on changes in self-reported criminal behavior between the 1980 and 1983 waves of the survey. Model 1, shown in the first column, shows the estimated impact of marital status conditional on relationship quality. Despite the restricted time-range of these analyses, these results confirm the patterns observed in Chapter 4. Entry into marriage is associated with disengagement from crime, but only for those individuals who enter marriages that are characterized by attachment and strong emotional bonds. Specifically, only those active offenders who entered medium-quality and high-quality marriages were more likely to desist from crime. Once again, the results also suggest that cohabitation has no such effect even if the quality of the relationship is taken into account.

Table 5.1 also presents results regarding the likely effects of marrying a spouse who condones criminal and delinquent behavior. Model 2 shows the interaction between marital status and the social orientation of the spouse or cohabiting partner. As can be seen, these results also suggest that the effects of marriage are conditional upon the characteristics of the relationship. In particular, individuals appear likely to desist from crime only in response to marriages to pro-social partners. Table 5.1 indicates that active offenders who have recently been married are approximately two times less likely to commit an offence than unmarried offenders, provided they believe that their spouses would strongly disapprove of them committing crime. By contrast, those individuals who marry partners who are unopposed to crime or only moderately opposed to it are just as likely to continue offending as their single counterparts.

These results, taken together, are consistent with the three theoretical perspectives outlined earlier, but they offer little information about the relative importance of relationship quality and the social orientations of partners. The relative importance of the two could be important, however, because despite my suggestions that all three theories imply that the effects of marriage should be contingent on both relationship quality and the social orientation of the other partner, several commentators have argued otherwise

(e.g. Sampson and Laub 1993; Laub and Sampson 2003; Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph 2002). Accordingly, Model 3 in Table 5.1 provides an assessment of the interaction between marital status, relationship quality, and social orientations.

In contrast to the claims made by these researchers, the results of Model 3 suggest that the effects of marriage on crime are conditional on both the quality of the relationship and the social orientation of the partner. Marriage is only likely to foster desistance from crime if it embroils the individual in a high-quality relationship with a pro-social spouse. Active offenders who failed to establish good relationships were just as likely to continue to commit crime as their single counterparts even if they believed that their spouses would disapprove of their antisocial behavior. Similarly, those respondents who managed to establish good marriages were not more likely to desist from crime than unmarried offenders if they believed that their spouses would condone their continued involvement in crime. Together, these results provide a counterpoint to Sampson and Laub's (1993) claim that attachment matters more than the deviance of the spouse and to Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph's (2002, p. 1049) contention that "marriage can be conventionalizing in its effects even in the absence of high attachment".

More particularly, these results indicate that the theoretical explanations typically offered for the impact of marriage on crime are incomplete. That is not to say that social control theory, social learning theory, and the theory of cognitive transformations cannot account for the relationship between marriage and desistance, but it does suggest that the ways in which these theories are typically applied by other researchers are inadequate. As I have noted already, each of these theories, if taken to its logical conclusion, implies that marriage should only lead to desistance if it is accompanied by strong emotional ties to conventional spouses. Given the likelihood that the effects of adult family relationships on crime are conditional on both these characteristics, failure to take account of these contingencies is likely to lead to the inaccurate assessment of the explanatory capacity of each theory. Of course, the proper evaluation of these theories also requires a reasonably thorough investigation of the mechanisms through which each presupposes that marriage promotes desistance.

Table 5.2 shows the estimated impact of entering a high-quality marriage to a pro-social spouse on crime, controlling for changes in exposure to delinquent peers, the

respondent's attitudes toward crime, self-perception and conventional aspirations. As can be seen, taking account of changes in an individual's exposure to delinquent peers reduces the estimated impact of marriage on the likelihood that she or he will desist from crime. Those respondents who had fewer criminal friends in 1983 than in 1980 were significantly more likely to desist from crime and these changes account for approximately 21 percent of the estimated impact of marriage. In other words, a substantial part of the estimated effect of marrying and establishing a high-quality relationship with a pro-social spouse is due to its impact on changes in the individual's social network. Nonetheless, it is also apparent that changes in patterns of peer association do not entirely mediate the effects of marriage. Even after controlling for possible decreases in the number of friends who have committed crime, getting married retains its direct impact upon the likelihood that an individual will desist from crime.

The introduction of attitude change to the model reduces the estimated impact of social network change and, to a much lesser extent, marriage. Taking account of changes in the perceived acceptability of criminal and delinquent behavior leads to a significant reduction in the estimated effects of changes in delinquent peer association on desistance. This could suggest, as social learning theorists might expect, that changes in differential association raise the likelihood of desistance, in part, by increasing the likelihood of attitudinal change. The slight reduction in the estimated impact of marriage is also consistent with social learning theory and its prediction that a high-quality marriage to conventional spouse should expose the individual to a learning environment that is more conducive to legal obedience. Nonetheless, individuals who adopted attitudes that were less favorable toward crime were not significantly more likely to desist once the effects of changes in patterns of delinquent association were taken into account. This could indicate that attitude change provokes changes in patterns of peer association — an interpretation that cannot be excluded because of the contemporaneous measurement of the two variables. However, it more probably indicates that having criminal friends has a direct effect on criminal behavior above and beyond its effects on attitudinal change.

These results are not inconsistent with social learning theory. As noted previously, social learning theory predicts that much of the impact of associating with criminal peers occurs not through the transmission of delinquent values and attitudes but,



instead, through the imitation and differential reinforcement of criminal behavior. Hence, although social learning theorists would expect to see some evidence that changes in peer association might predict changes in an individual's own attitudes towards crime, they would not expect that attitudinal change would be the sole mechanism through which changes in patterns of criminal associations could lead to desistance.

The problem, however, as I have also noted, is that social learning theory is not the only theoretical perspective that predicts a direct correspondence between the behavior of the individual and the behavior of his or her friends. The results obtained in Table 5.2 are entirely consistent with the explanations offered by social control theorists and others who might emphasize the importance of opportunity to desistance (e.g. Laub and Sampson 2003; Osgood and Lee 1996). It is entirely plausible, considering these results, that marriage helps foster desistance because spouses control the behavior of their partners, including the people with whom they associate, and that these changes in peer association affect their involvement in crime primarily by reducing their opportunities to become embroiled in it. Despite some apparent correspondence between changes in delinquent peer exposure and attitudinal shifts, the results presented in Table 5.3 do not offer any direct evidence in support of the social learning explanation that could not also be interpreted as evidence in support of a rival theoretical perspective.

Model 4 introduces the measure of changes in delinquent identity to the analysis. As can be seen, taking account of changes in the reflected appraisals of others also reduces the estimated impact of marriage on desistance. This result is consistent with the expectations of the theory of cognitive transformations and, in particular, its prediction that marriage can help some offenders to develop pro-social identities. Nevertheless, it should be noted that changes in the reflected appraisals of significant others account for less than 10 percent of the estimated impact of marriage on desistance from crime. Irrespective of how marriage might affect the ways that offenders think they are perceived by others, it continues to promote disengagement from crime through other means. Taking into account changes in the individual's delinquent identity also leads to a small reduction in the estimated impact of changes in exposure to delinquent peers, which could suggest that some of the impact of social network change is mediated by changes in the reflected appraisals of significant others. Whatever role that changes in self-concept

might play in mediating the links between marriage, social network change and crime, however, changes in delinquent identity do not exert a significant direct effect on the probability of re-offending among the sample of active offenders.

The introduction of the indicator of changes in conventional goals shown in the last column of Table 5.2 appears to have no effect on the estimated impact of marriage or its exposure to delinquent peers. This seems to suggest that the links between marriage and desistance cannot be attributed to the effects of role socialization as expected by theories that emphasize the importance of identity change. In contrast to Hypothesis 5.6, there is no evidence that marriage reduces an individual's involvement in crime by encouraging him or her to place greater importance on conventional goals and aspirations. Accordingly, it seems very unlikely that marriage leads to desistance because offenders who develop successful marriages to pro-social spouses are more inclined to avoid the incompatibility of crime and their newly acquired roles as husbands or wives.

Of course, theories that emphasize the role of identity change in desistance place considerable importance on how these shifts affect an individual's attitudes towards crime. As a result, indicators of identity change should not distinguish desisting offenders from re-offenders once attitudinal changes have been taken into account. However, whether changes in the reflected appraisals of others or the individual's interest in conventional goals are able to predict desistance independently of their effects on changes in his or her social orientations is not the problem; rather, the problem is that attitudinal change fails to distinguish those offenders who re-offend from those who show signs of moving away from crime. Overall, therefore, the results presented in Table 5.2 provide very little support for the theory of cognitive transformations and its explanation for the celebrated impact of marriage on desistance from crime.

Table 5.3 provides some clarification of these findings and the other results shown in Table 5.2. It shows the estimated impact of marriage on changes in the perceived appropriateness of crime. As can be seen, active offenders who married and established high-quality relationships with pro-social spouses did become less supportive of criminal and delinquent behavior. Although the degree of attitudinal change associated with marriage was not especially large, it is consistent with the theoretical expectations of the social learning and cognitive transformation theories.

The introduction of changes in exposure to delinquent peers, shown in Model 2, suggests that these changes are due primarily to the effects of marriage on patterns of peer association. Taking changes in each respondent's social network into consideration leads to a reduction in the estimated impact of marriage on crime to the point that marriage can no longer be used to distinguish changes in the perceived appropriateness of crime and delinquency. In other words, as individuals marry pro-social partners and establish more loving and supportive relationships, they encounter significant changes in terms of the types of people with whom they associate. These changes appear to shift people away from the social networks that are, on balance, more tolerant of crime into those that are likely to protest their involvement in crime. As a result, consistent with a social learning explanation for desistance, marriage increases the offender's chances of acquiring a set of attitudes favorable to social conformity. Notwithstanding these patterns, as noted earlier in reference to Table 5.2, it is changes in exposure to delinquent peers rather than changes in the social orientation of the individual that is the more important predictor of behavioral change — a finding that is consistent with both the social control and social learning theory explanations of the marital effect.

Table 5.3 offers some evidence that changes in an individual's identity following marriage are associated with attitudinal change. As can be seen, Model 3 in Table 5.3 also indicates that active offenders who felt that their parents were less likely to see them as law-breakers were less supportive of crime and delinquency in 1983 than they had been in 1980. To some extent, these changes could have lead to changes in patterns of peer association, although it is just as likely that these changes in self-perception result, in part, from reductions in an individual's exposure to delinquent friends. As individuals change their social networks perhaps others begin to see them in a different light. In any case, the fact that attitudinal change failed to significantly predict desistance, independently of patterns of delinquent peer association, undermines the viability of cognitive transformation theories relative to social control and social learning theories.

## **Conclusions**

Prior research on the relationship between marriage and desistance has identified

a number of mechanisms through which entry into marriage is believed to promote disengagement from crime. These mechanisms include: the development of social bonds and emotional interdependence; significant lifestyle changes including reductions in exposure to delinquent peers; direct supervision and control by one spouse over the other; and shifts in self-perception that include the adoption of a pro-social identity. In addition, each of these mechanisms is associated, to some extent, with one of three theories of desistance: social control theories; social learning theory; and the theory of cognitive transformations. Despite some similarities in the empirical implications of these theories, each offers a markedly different interpretation of why marriage should promote changes in criminal and delinquent behavior.

Nevertheless, these explanations, as they relate to the links between marriage and desistance, have rarely been evaluated properly. When they have been assessed, the studies that did so tended to focus on a single mechanism or theory at a time (Sampson and Laub 1993; Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998; Laub and Sampson 2003). More importantly, even when these studies evaluated more than one theory simultaneously, they often overlooked important similarities in their predictions and consequently, claimed support for a particular mechanism or theoretical perspective even when the evidence supported multiple interpretations (Warr 1998; Maume, Ousey, and Beaver 2005). That is not to say that others have not made deliberate attempts to distinguish between the empirical implications of competing perspectives. However, even these efforts have been limited, as researchers are exaggerated minor differences between the various theories of desistance (e.g. Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph 2002). The overall result has been that little is actually known, as opposed to postulated, as to why marriage is able to promote lasting behavioral change.

The purpose of this chapter has been to move beyond theoretical conjectures in order to evaluate empirically three theories of desistance as explanations for why marriage affects involvement in crime: social control theory, social learning theory, and the theory of cognitive transformation. In doing so, I have sought to examine the theoretical mechanisms implied by each of these theories to the degree that available data have permitted and to test these against one another so as to identify the processes that are most relevant to understanding why marriage promotes desistance from crime. At the

same time, I have endeavored to isolate the empirical predictions that are unique to each perspective as well as those that are common to all.

One of the most important results of this analysis has been the observation that the impact of marriage on desistance is conditional on the quality of the relationship and the social orientation of the partner. Despite the fact that several researchers have argued for the relative importance of one of these conditions over the other, as I have suggested in this chapter, all three theoretical perspectives imply a jointly conditional hypothesis; specifically, in the absence of either attachment or a pro-social orientation on the part of the other partner, the anticipated impact of marriage on desistance should be negligible. The results of the analysis provide clear confirmation of this expectation. Both the quality of the relationship and the social orientation of the spouse are critical factors in explaining the links between marriage and desistance.

In terms of the actual mechanism through which marriage affects desistance, the results of these analyses are consistent with the proposition that marriage promotes disengagement from crime: first, by establishing the informal social control of the individual (Sampson and Laub 1993; Laub and Sampson 2003); and second, by reducing an individual's exposure to criminal peers (Warr 1998). In other words, in contrast to the claims made by some researchers, the impact of marriage on desistance cannot be explained entirely with reference to either its effect on the development of informal social control for its impact on social network change (e.g. Sampson and Laub 1993; Warr 1998). These results are broadly consistent with the expectations of social control theory and social learning theories as explanations for the effects of marriage on desistance.

Given that these theories overlap considerably in terms of their empirical implications, it is not always possible to develop definitive tests of these perspectives. Nevertheless, the predictions of these two theories do diverge in one important respect. Of the two, only social learning theory, anticipates a direct role for attitudinal change in the desistance process. In regard to this difference, the evidence is equivocal. Entering a high-quality marriage to a pro-social spouse is associated with a reduction in the individual's support for crime and delinquency and this change accounts for some of the effect of marriage on desistance. At the same time, marriage is also likely to reduce an individual's exposure to delinquent friends and this too can promote attitudinal change in

a way that accounts for some of the impact of marriage on crime. In other words, there is clear support for the social learning explanation of the links between marriage and desistance, although changes in exposure to criminal friends have a greater impact on the likelihood of desistance than attitudinal change. More importantly, even taking into account, all of these developments, marriage continues to have a direct impact on the likelihood of desistance. While these results too are consistent with social learning theory, they are also anticipated by social control theory.

By contrast, the results presented here provide little support for the claim that marriage fosters desistance through its impact on changes in self-concept and personal identity. Even though marriage is associated with changes in reflected appraisals and by assumption in how individuals perceive themselves and even though these shifts are related to changes in the individual's attitudes, as predicted by the theory, these cognitive transformations are not able to distinguish re-offenders from desisting offenders once other factors are taken into account. Of course, it is possible that shifts in self-concept can promote attitudinal changes and that these can lead people to avoid criminal peers. Given the contemporaneous measurement of many of these concepts, I am not able to rule out this possibility. To do so, definitively would require further investigation.

In any case, the analyses presented here move beyond prior research in advancing our understanding of what factors most likely mediate the links between marriage and crime and why. The next step is to consider whether marriage promotes desistance among both men and women and if so, if it does so to the same degree.

**Table 5.1: Logistic Regression of Desistance on Marriage, 1980-1983**

	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>	<b>Model 2</b>
Constant	10.62 (12.34)	9.22 (12.39)	11.28 (12.50)
Age	-0.87 (1.19)	-0.74 (1.20)	-0.94 (1.21)
Age <sup>2</sup>	0.02 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)
Male	1.13*** (0.21)	1.12*** (0.21)	1.13*** (0.21)
Black	0.37 (0.26)	0.40 (0.26)	0.41 (0.27)
Hispanic	0.77 (0.58)	0.77 (0.59)	0.73 (0.59)
Employment	-0.10 (0.24)	-0.09 (0.24)	-0.10 (0.24)
College	0.15 (0.21)	0.13 (0.21)	0.12 (0.21)
Left School	-0.38* (0.22)	-0.34 (0.23)	-0.33 (0.23)
<b>Marital Status x Relationship Quality</b>			
<i>Low-Quality Marriage</i>	0.15 (0.40)	—	—
<i>High-Quality Marriage</i>	-0.95** (0.48)	—	—
<i>Low-Quality Cohabitation</i>	0.18 (0.54)	—	—
<i>High-Quality Cohabitation</i>	0.74 (0.64)	—	—
<b>Marital Status x Social Orientation</b>			
<i>Antisocial Spouse</i>	—	0.36 (0.44)	—
<i>Pro-social Spouse</i>	—	-0.98** (0.45)	—
<i>Antisocial (Cohabiting) Partner</i>	—	0.95 (0.62)	—
<i>Pro-social (Cohabiting) Partner</i>	—	-0.09 (0.57)	—
<b>Marital Status x Relationship Quality x Social Orientation</b>			
<i>Low-Quality Marriage, Antisocial Spouse</i>	—	—	0.46. (0.52)
<i>Low-Quality Marriage, Pro-social Spouse</i>	—	—	-0.26. (0.59)

Table 5.1 – continued.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 2
<b>Marital Status x Relationship Quality x Social Orientation</b>			
<i>High-Quality Marriage, Antisocial Spouse</i>	—	—	0.15 (0.74)
<i>High-Quality Marriage, Pro-social Spouse</i>	—	—	-1.97** (0.79)
<i>Low-Quality Cohabitation, Antisocial Partner</i>	—	—	1.01 (0.86)
<i>Low-Quality Cohabitation, Pro-social Partner</i>	—	—	-0.57 (0.77)
<i>High-Quality Cohabitation, Antisocial Partner</i>	—	—	0.88 (0.88)
<i>High-Quality Cohabitation, Pro-social Partner</i>	—	—	0.59 (0.92)

p < 0.10; \*\* p < 0.05; \*\*\* p < 0.01



**Table 5.2: Logistic Regression of Desistance on Marriage and Mediators, 1980-1983**

	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>	<b>Model 3</b>	<b>Model 4</b>	<b>Model 5</b>
Constant	10.46 (12.39)	7.30 (12.61)	7.54 (12.63)	7.35 (12.63)	7.78 (12.65)
Age	-0.86 (1.20)	-0.54 (1.22)	-0.56 (1.22)	-0.53 (1.22)	-0.58 (1.22)
Age <sup>2</sup>	0.02 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)
Male	1.08*** (0.20)	1.11*** (0.21)	1.11*** (0.21)	1.07*** (0.21)	1.09*** (0.21)
Black	0.38 (0.26)	0.30 (0.27)	0.31 (0.27)	0.33 (0.27)	0.34 (0.27)
Hispanic	0.76 (0.59)	0.65 (0.60)	0.61 (0.59)	0.53 (0.59)	0.53 (0.59)
Employment	-0.07 (0.24)	-0.07 (0.24)	-0.08 (0.24)	-0.05 (0.25)	-0.04 (0.25)
College	0.12 (0.20)	0.09 (0.21)	0.07 (0.21)	0.08 (0.21)	0.08 (0.21)
Left School	-0.38* (0.22)	-0.42* (0.23)	-0.43* (0.23)	-0.41* (0.23)	-0.41* (0.23)
Marriage (High Quality, Prosocial Spouse)	-2.03** (0.79)	-1.61** (0.81)	-1.55* (0.81)	-1.43* (0.82)	-1.44* (0.82)
Exposure to Delinquent Peers	—	0.46** (0.16)	0.37** (0.18)	0.33* (0.18)	0.33* (0.18)
Social Orientation	—	—	0.32 (0.22)	0.28 (0.22)	0.27 (0.22)
Delinquent Identity	—	—	—	0.30 (0.20)	0.31 (0.20)
Conventional Goals	—	—	—	—	0.23 (0.35)
Log likelihood	-337.03	-328.72	-327.66	-326.54	-326.32
N	544	537	536	536	536

p < 0.10; \*\* p < 0.05; \*\*\* p < 0.01

**Table 5.3: Ordinary Least Squares Regression of Social Orientation on Marriage and Mediators, 1980-1983**

	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>	<b>Model 3</b>	<b>Model 4</b>
Constant	2.12 (2.70)	-0.41 (2.52)	-0.41 (2.51)	-0.27 (2.51)
Age	-0.21 (0.26)	0.03 (0.24)	0.03 (0.24)	0.02 (0.24)
Age <sup>2</sup>	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Male	0.01 (0.05)	0.00 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.04)
Black	0.07 (0.06)	-0.02 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.05)
Hispanic	0.22** (0.11)	0.10 (0.11)	0.08 (0.11)	0.08 (0.46)
Employment	0.02 (0.05)	0.02 (0.05)	0.03 (0.05)	0.04 (0.05)
College	0.06 (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)
Left School	0.03 (0.05)	0.03 (0.05)	0.04 (0.34)	0.04 (0.04)
Marriage (High Quality, Pro-social Spouse)	-0.27** (0.13)	-0.20 (0.14)	-0.14 (0.14)	-0.15 (0.14)
Exposure to Delinquent Peers		0.30*** (0.03)	0.27*** (0.03)	0.27*** (0.03)
Delinquent Identity			0.11** (0.04)	0.11** (0.04)
Conventional Goals				0.11 (0.07)
N	544	537	537	537
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.02	0.15	0.17	0.16

p < 0.10; \*\* p < 0.05; \*\*\* p < 0.01

## CHAPTER 6

As noted in Chapters 4 and 5, whether marriage is likely to promote desistance appears to depend on the type of person the offender marries as well as the nature of their relationship. These findings clearly lend some support to the idea that the effects of life-course transitions are not categorical; instead, they depend a great deal on the kinds of experiences that such transitions engender in the lives of the individuals who encounter them. To that end, the two preceding chapters help clarify the limits of life-course transitions as agents in the desistance process and to some extent, provide more nuanced explanations for why many offenders who experience marriage do not desist from crime. They also can help improve our understanding of how and why these transitions affect criminal behavior by moving beyond simple platitudes about the importance of human agency to consider some of the ways in which personal judgment is most likely to matter.

Of course, even if researchers were to explain why some offenders are more likely to develop high-quality marriages to pro-social spouses, the effects of even these types of marriages are likely to vary across the population in seemingly unpredictable ways. In the context of life-course criminology, it may be tempting once again to assign such unexplained variation to human agency and the inherent randomness of human life. Needless to say, whether or not marriage will result in behavioral change is likely to depend on the meanings that people ascribe to it in addition to any number of idiosyncrasies. Nonetheless, even these variations may obscure some underlying order. At the very least, the impact of key life experiences might depend on observable differences between individuals, especially with respect to differences that are known already to be consequential to the study of crime, such as age, sex, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. To the extent that these characteristics reflect approximate differences in the meaning of events, the likelihood of their occurrence, or their links to the causes of crime, they may be significant sources of variation in desistance.

In this chapter, I investigate the extent to which the effects of marriage on desistance are contingent on sex. Specifically, I extend the analyses presented in Chapter 4 to consider the hypothesis that female offenders who marry are less likely to desist from crime than are male offenders. Although other socio-demographic characteristics,

such as age, ethnicity, or socio-economic status, might condition the impact of life-course transitions on desistance from crime, investigating possible sex differences in the effects of marriage on criminal behavior is especially important for a number of reasons. For one thing, sex is one of the most important correlates of involvement in crime (Steffensmeier and Allan 1996; Steffensmeier and Allan 2000), yet its relevance to criminal and delinquent behavior remains an underdeveloped area of research, especially in comparison to characteristics such as socio-economic status (Chesney-Lind and Sheldon 2004). This is especially the case with respect to life-course criminology in which an over-reliance on male samples has ensured that the role of sex has been completely absent from some of the most influential studies in the field (e.g. Sampson and Laub 1993; Laub and Sampson 2003; Farrington 1998; Wolfgang, Figlio and Sellin 1972).

There are a number of reasons to suspect that the crime-suppressing benefits of marriage are confined to men. Furthermore, there is also a growing body of research that contends that the onset, escalation, persistence, and desistance of female offending requires its own explanations (e.g. Daly and Chesney-Lind 1988). This research agenda has highlighted a number distinct pathways through which women are likely to become involved in and abandon crime (Chesney-Lind and Sheldon 2004; Uggen and Kruttschnitt 1998; Sommers, Baskin, and Fagan 1994; Holtfreter, Reisig, and Morash 2004). In particular, it points to some transformative life experiences that appear to affect involvement in crime disproportionately among women, including sexual victimization in childhood and adolescence (Chesney-Lind and Sheldon 2004) and parenthood in adulthood (Graham and Bowling 1995; Moore and Hagedorn 1999; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002). If, as these studies suggests, men and women engage in and desist from crime for different reasons, then the relationship between marriage and desistance may not apply to female offenders.

### **Marriage and Crime among Men and Women**

The majority of studies that have documented a link between marriage and desistance have observed that association among samples of male offenders (e.g. Meisenhelder 1977; Gibbens 1984; Sampson and Laub 1993; Laub and Sampson 2003;

Farrington and West 1995). Meanwhile, those studies that have examined the links between marriage and crime among men and women, including the analyses reported in Chapters 4 and 5 often have treated sex as just another risk or protective factor to be controlled in additive models of crime (e.g. Warr 1998). The problem with this approach, however, is that it assumes that the factors that predict desistance affect criminal behavior among both men and women and to the same degree. And, given that men are far more likely to be involved in crime, in the first place, it is likely that those factors that are associated with desistance among men, in particular, are those that are most likely to emerge from such analyses as significant predictors of change.

Only two published studies have investigated the degree to which the effects of marriage might vary across the sexes. In the first of these studies, in large-scale statistical analyses of the relationship between marriage and desistance, marriage failed to predict changes in offending among either men or women. Nonetheless, it did emerge as a catalyst for desistance in in-depth interviews with a number of female offenders (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002). In fact, Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph (2002) found considerable overlap between the processes of desistance as described by men and women. In their interviews with male offenders, Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph (2002) noted that many of the same events that featured in the desistance narratives of women also emerged in the stories told by these men, although there were some minor sex differences in the way respondents described these events and how they had affected their involvement in crime. Thus, marriage appeared to promote desistance among men and women even though the role that it played in their desistance varied slightly between the sexes (Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph 2002).

These findings are consistent with the results of other studies, based on in-depth interviews with female offenders that have confirmed that there is a link between marriage and desistance among women. Nonetheless, since these findings apply to small numbers of offenders it is difficult to know whether these patterns are indicative of more general trends or are confined to a minority of aberrant cases. Moreover, in the absence of systematic comparisons across the sexes, these studies can offer little insight as to whether marriage can constrain crime to the same degree among women as among men.

The second study to have investigated possible sex differences in the effects of marriage compared the relationship between marriage and crime for male and female respondents to the National Youth Survey — the study used in this dissertation (King, Massoglia, and MacMillan 2007). Despite finding that married men and women were less likely to commit crime than single respondents, King, Massoglia, and MacMillan (2007) noted that marriage had no effect on crime among women. They concluded that “marriage ... [is] a more salient institution for males relative to females” (King, Massoglia, and MacMillan 2007, p. 57). A particular feature of the analysis presented by these authors was their use of propensity score matching to compare respondents with comparable probabilities of marriage. By doing so, King, Massoglia, and MacMillan (2007) observed that, in addition to sex differences in the average effects of marriage on crime, the relationship between marriage and crime was contingent on the individual’s propensity to marry. In particular, marriage was associated with reductions in crime only among women who were in the medium range of a continuum measuring their likelihood of marriage (King, Massoglia, and MacMillan 2007).

These results do not mean necessarily that the effects of marriage on desistance are contingent on sex because they are based entirely on between-individual differences in offending (King, Massoglia, and MacMillan 2007). Even though these researchers used propensity score matching to minimize the likelihood that they might observe spurious links between marriage and crime, propensity score matching is only as effective as it is comprehensive<sup>4</sup>. Unless readers can be confident that all possible confounding factors have been controlled, the fact that married women are not less likely

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<sup>4</sup> Their use of propensity score matching may have even exaggerated the extent of sex differences in the relationship between marriage and crime. Given the importance of prior offending in their analyses of the propensity for marriage especially among male respondents (King, Massoglia, and MacMillan 2007), it is possible that sex differences in the links between marriage, crime, and marital propensity merely reflect differences in the baseline rates of offending for men and women. In other words, among men who are (heavily involved in crime and are therefore) unlikely to marry, marriage distinguishes offenders from non-offenders. By contrast, among women who have a low-propensity to marry, marriage does not distinguish between offenders and non-offenders to the same degree because there is less variation in their rates of offending.

than unmarried women to commit crime does not mean, as these authors have assumed, that marriage is not causally relevant to women. Thus, although their analyses might support the inference that marriage does not promote desistance among men and women, they provide no direct evidence that female offenders are less likely to desist from crime after they marry.

### **Why Might Marriage Affect Men and Women Differently?**

There are a number of reasons to suspect that the relationship between marriage and desistance observed in Chapters 4 and 5 and reported in countless other studies either does not apply to women or does not apply to the same degree as it does among men. When discussing sex differences in the effects of marriage (or cohabitation), however, it is important to distinguish between two types of variability. First, the overall effect of marriage on criminal behavior as an outcome may vary across the two sexes in terms of either the magnitude or direction of its impact. For example, whereas marriage leads to desistance among men, it may not have any discernible impact on the behavior of female offenders (or it might even lead to an escalation in crime among women). Alternatively, marriage might promote disengagement from crime among women, but to a lesser extent than it does among male offenders. Whatever patterns may be observed, sex differences in the effects of marriage, so far as they exist, should be discernible as variations in the statistical associations between marriage and desistance.

Second, even if marriage does constrain crime among women, as effectively as it does for men, it may do so for different reasons. For instance, marriage may foster desistance among men primarily because it exposes them to monitoring and supervision, by pro-social spouses, whereas marriage may constrain crime among women by reducing their exposure to criminal or delinquent friends. These two sources of difference could be interrelated. For instance, different mechanisms could give the impression that one relationship is more important for men than women. However, they might also be independent of one another. Thus, marriage could be less important for women, in terms of the magnitude of its effect, even though it promotes desistance for the same reasons.

## **The Gender Gap in Crime**

Sex is the most important predictor of involvement in crime; indeed, some researchers have suggested that the disproportionate involvement of men in crime and delinquency is sufficiently universal to conclude that “everywhere women are less likely than men to commit crime” (Steffensmeier and Allan 1996). Although much of the research documenting sex differences in offending has been based on cross-sectional studies, there is a growing body of research indicating that these patterns are replicated in longitudinal research designs. For example, D’Unger, Land, and McCall (1998) noted that fewer women than men exhibited patterns of high-rate, chronic and persistent offending over time. Moreover, they also observed that even when women and men appeared to follow similar patterns of offending over time, in terms of onset, escalation, deceleration, and desistance, the women committed crime at much lower rates than the men (D’Unger, Land, and McCall 1998).

The fact that men and women have vastly different probabilities of being involved in crime suggests that any development that help promotes disengagement from crime is likely to have a more dramatic effect on men than it does on women. Thus, the gender gap alone could give the appearance that marriage has differential effects on criminal behavior by men and women. The more critical issue, therefore, is not whether the estimated change in offending that accompanies marriage is the same for men as it is for women; rather, it is how such differences ought to be interpreted. In particular, it seems important to know whether sex differences in the likelihood of re-offending among married men and women are indicative of meaningful differences in the ability of marriage to constrain male and female crime. Given the baseline differences between men and women in terms of their probabilities and rates of offending, sex differences in the magnitude of the marital effect are hardly noteworthy. The more important test is whether or not marriage is associated with behavioral change among both men and women.



## **The Gender Gap in Marriage**

It is possible also that sex differences in the likelihood of entering marriage could give the appearance that the effects of marriage on crime are greater among men than women. This is perhaps especially likely if prior involvement in crime reduces the likelihood of entering marriage, a pattern that might affect men disproportionately given their higher rates of involvement in crime. Thus, when King, Massoglia, and MacMillan (2007) matched respondents according to their propensities to marry, which took account of prior levels of offending, they observed a weaker relationship between marriage and crime among women than men. At the same time, in so far as there is greater social stigma associated with criminal and delinquent behavior among women, these patterns could be offset by the greater difficulties encountered by female offenders in finding partners (Giordano, Deines, and Cernkovich 2006). In any case, since it is not so much marriage as entry into a particular type of marriage that matters, an even more important consideration might be the degree to which men and women have varying propensities to establish the kinds of relationships that are most likely to promote disengagement from crime; specifically, high-quality marriages to pro-social spouses.

That the likelihood of marrying a pro-social spouse might vary for men and women seems especially likely given the considerable differences in rates of offending between men and women. Since men are at greater risk than women of being involved in crime, the chances that they will meet and marry a pro-social spouse are greater than the odds that women will do the same. Notwithstanding any tendency for men and women to marry other individuals who are similar to themselves, all other things being equal, “men marry ‘up’ and women ‘down’” (Laub and Sampson 2003, p. 45). Irrespective of their attachment to their partners, therefore, women might be less likely to marry the kinds of men who can help them abandon crime. Nonetheless, whatever the extent of the gender gap in crime, criminal behavior is still a relatively rare occurrence even among men and as such, even though heterosexual men and women should have vastly different probabilities of finding pro-social partners, even female offenders have a reasonably good chance of finding a pro-social spouse.

## **Marriage as a Gendered Institution**

One reason to expect that marriage may operate differently for men and women is that its meaning may differ for the two sexes. The expression differences in meaning can encompass numerous things that are potentially relevant to understanding the links between gender, marriage, and crime. It might include the importance that partners give to their marriages; differences in the roles and responsibilities that people assume in marriage; differences in the ways that people interpret their roles (even if they do not differ in their expectations of which roles and responsibilities they might perform); and, differences in the norms that govern the behavior of individual partners and regulate their interactions with one another or with others outside the relationship dyad. Whatever these differences in meaning, in so far as they alter systematically the extent to which men or women are exposed to the mechanisms supporting desistance, sex differences in the effects of marriage on crime are likely to be observed. Given the results presented in Chapter 5, sex differences in the meaning of marriage that affect the establishment of social bonds of mutual independence, exposure to deviant peers, or the extent to which spouses attempt to control the behavior of their partners are perhaps most likely to contribute to sex differences in the likely effects of marriage.

There is some evidence, in particular, that “women have historically maintained closer relationships to the family and have been more likely to derive status from marital partners” (Giordano, Deines, and Cernkovich 2006, p. 23). As a result, they may be more likely than men to develop strong attachment to their spouses and may even be more responsive than male offenders to the emotional ties that they develop with their partners.

At the same time, other differences in the meanings that men and women attach to marriage might affect the mechanisms through which marriage is most likely to lead to desistance from crime. Due to apparent sex differences in the functions of friendship (Auckett, Ritchie and Mill 1988; Stein et al 1992), for example, marriage may have markedly different effects on the social networks of married men and women. In particular, at least one study has suggested that since there is greater differentiation in the functions performed by intimate partners and close friends among women, marriage is likely to have a more deleterious impact on the friendship networks of men (Kalmijn 2003). And, since one of the key ways in which marriage appears to promote changes in

criminal behavior is by reducing an individual's exposure to delinquent peers, if correct, this could suggest that marriage is less likely to foster desistance among women.

As noted in Chapter 5, another potentially important mediating mechanism in the relationship between marriage and crime is the degree of social control that spouses exercise over one another. Of all the mechanisms that are hypothesized to mediate the links between marriage and crime, direct social control is perhaps most likely to be moderated by sex differences in the meaning of marriage. As Laub and Sampson (2003, p. 43) note, the men in their study came of age in an era in which "wives... took primary control of the planning and management of the household and often acted as informal guardians of their husbands' activities". Farrington and West (1995, p. 255) observed similar cultural mores at work in "the male tradition of turning over the bulk of wages to 'the wife', but keeping back an undisclosed ... proportion for spending in the pub". While these studies were attentive primarily to the control that wives exercised over their husbands — they were based on male samples — their comments are indicative of some notable gender differences in the division of marital responsibilities. In fact, in more traditional marriages, women may play a much stronger role in monitoring and supervision of spouses than do men (Umberson 1992). This could suggest that marriages that are characterized by such clear divisions of labor are a much less likely to reduce crime and delinquency by females than by males. More broadly, it could imply that marriage is less likely to result in desistance among women than among men.

Of course, it is possible that the norms of expectations that may have given rise to gender divisions in the execution of social control may have changed considerably over the years. Moreover, even if contemporary popular culture abounds with examples of married women who monitor, supervise and mother their husbands, there are sufficient examples of men who have directly intervened in the lives of their partners to help preclude their involvement in crime (e.g. Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002). In any case, the degree to which sex differences in supervision and control lead to sex differences in the effects of marriage on desistance will depend, ultimately, on how much supervision, monitoring and control actually matter to the desistance process.

## **Desistance as a Gendered Process**

The above discussion takes, as its point of departure, the assumption that the processes that lead individuals into and away from crime operate in much the same way for men and women. From this perspective, whether or not marriage is able to promote disengagement from crime depends on the degree to which women are likely to experience certain types of marriage or the extent to which marriage is likely to expose them to the very mechanisms that engender changes in criminal behavior. There is, however, a fundamentally different theoretical perspective that also suggests that the effects of marriage on crime are likely to differ significantly for men and women. According to this latter viewpoint, the effects of marriage on crime are moderated by sex because the causes of crime are different for men and women.

Given the historically disproportionate emphasis that criminology has given to criminal behavior among men, it is hardly surprising that traditional criminological theories have been criticized as male-oriented (Simpson 1989; Chesney-Lind and Sheldon 2004). Feminist criminologists have alleged that this overemphasis on male delinquency has left traditional criminological theories incapable of explaining female crime and delinquency adequately (Chesney-Lind 1997, Chesney-Lind and Sheldon 2004). The problem is that traditional theories, such as social control or social learning theory, are based on theoretical concepts that “are inscribed so deeply by masculinist (sic) experience that this approach will prove too restrictive, or at least misleading” if applied to the behavior of women (Daly and Chesney-Lind 1992, p. 519). More importantly, in so far as they overlook gender and its “[social construction] from relations of dominance and inequality between men and women” (Chesney-Lind and Randal 2004, p. 98), traditional criminological theories ignore the very concept that is most critical to understanding why women commit crime if and when they do.

Feminist criminologists, therefore, have sought to draw greater attention to the unique experiences of women and the ways in which these experiences, grounded in concepts such as gender and patriarchy, affect their involvement in crime and delinquency. An important conclusion from this research has been that the pathways through which women become embroiled in crime are dissimilar from those followed by men. For example, as Chesney-Lind and Faith (2001, p. 299) note, “research consistently

documents that victimization is at the heart of much of girls' and women's law-breaking and that this pattern of gender entrapment ... best explains women's involvement in crime" (e.g. McCormack, Janus, and Burgess 1986; Dembo, Dertke, La Voie, Borders, Washburn, and Schmeidler 1987)<sup>5</sup>. While these findings relate to the onset of criminal behavior, as long as the causes of crime and delinquency differ for men and women, so too may the causes of their desistance. Life-course transitions that promote disengagement from crime by removing the factors that encourage the individual to commit crime, as in the case of marriage taking offenders away from the delinquent peers, are only likely to have such an impact as long as the factors that they remove are actually relevant to the individual's involvement in crime. Even though marriage fosters desistance among male offenders, if the reasons why men and women engage in crime differ in fundamental ways, it may not have any effect on desistance among the latter.

There are a number of reasons to suspect, therefore, that marriage may not be as important in explaining the desistance of female offenders as that of males and that much of the information about the effects of marriage on crime, based as it is on studies of male offenders, should not be assumed to apply to women. Some of these arguments relate solely to differences in the effects of marriage, whereas others raise more fundamental theoretical issues regarding the degree to which the processes by which men and women desist from crime are completely dissimilar. Hence:

*Hypothesis 6.1: Women in high-quality marriages will commit as much crime as men in high-quality marriages*

*Hypothesis 6.2: Women entering high-quality cohabiting relationships will be as likely to desist from crime as men entering high-quality marriages.*

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<sup>5</sup> It is possible that feminist criminologists may have exaggerated the exceptionality of the predictors of female crime and delinquency. There is some evidence, for example, that childhood and adolescent victimization also contributes to criminal involvement among men (Dembo, Williams, Schmeidler et al 1992; Dembo, Williams, Wotke et al 1992; Weeks and Widom 1998; Widom and Ames 1994).

As I have already noted, the observation of differences in and of themselves may not be especially significant. For example, differences in the estimated effects of marriage on crime could be due to differences in baseline rate of offending or because of unobserved factors that are especially relevant to desistance for either men or women. The more important standard for evaluating sex differences in the impact of marriage on crime is whether the relationship between marriage and desistance is conditional on gender. In other words, does marriage, promote desistance for both men and women?

*Hypothesis 6.3: Individuals in high-quality relationships, whether male or female, will commit less crime than single persons*

*Hypothesis 6.4: Those who enter high-quality marriages, whether male or female, will commit less crime than they did when they were not high-quality marriages.*

Irrespective of whether the effects of marriage on desistance are moderated by sex, it is important to note that sex differences in the predictors of desistance do not necessarily imply that the men and women engage in and desist from crime for different reasons. For example, it could be that “the factors that influence delinquent development differ for males and females in some contexts, but not others” (Kruttschnitt 1996, p. 141). Whether men and women follow different pathways into crime and the degree to which these pathways are distinct is an empirical question, but the issue of whether such differences are so great as to require fundamentally different theoretical propositions is also a theoretical one. Even if the transformative experiences that trigger the termination of offending are distinct for men and women, similarities in the underlying processes that explain the effects of these transitions implies the need for a gendered, rather than gender-specific, theory (Steffensmeier 1996; Steffensmeier and Allan 2000).

Take parenthood as an example. Previous research has shown that parenthood is an especially important factor in the desistance of female offenders (Graham and Bowling 1995, Moore and Hagedorn 1999, Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph 2002), but it appears not to have much of an effect on male offenders (Krohn, Lizotte, and Perez 1997). On the one hand, these researchers may have observed genuine sex differences in the causes of desistance. On the other hand, it could be that in some contexts, especially

in those situations in which people are not likely to experience other transformative life events, parenthood plays an especially important part in promoting their desistance. In other words, it is not so much that men and women abandon crime for different reasons; rather, the events that trigger their desistance may vary in accordance with their access to them.

Conversely, even if marriage is associated with desistance among men and women, it should not be assumed that their involvement in crime and their desistance from it is not shaped, in some way, by gender. Just as the absence of a strong empirical association between marriage and female desistance would not necessarily mean that the causes of crime are different for men and women, finding that marriage encourages both male and female offenders to give up crime should not be taken to mean that the two sexes desist for the same reasons. For one thing, other factors might play an even greater role in the desistance stories of women than men and these factors could affect their involvement in crime for fundamentally different reasons. Moreover, even those transitions that affect desistance among men and women might constrain their behavior for different reasons. Only by examining a range of changes that are likely to promote desistance at the same time as investigating all the mechanisms that mediate the links between those changes and crime would it be possible to resolve the issue of whether desistance can best be understood in terms of gender-neutral, gendered, or gender-specific theories.

Given the enormous challenges involved in resolving these issues definitively, in the analyses that follow my principal concern is to evaluate the hypotheses regarding the degree to which sex moderates the effects of marriage on crime. Since so little research has examined empirically even this proposition, surely the first step towards developing more refined understanding of how gender relates to desistance should be to determine whether or not transitions such as marriage have comparable effects on men and women.

### **Data and method**

To test the above hypotheses, I analyzed the results of the last four publicly-available waves of the National Youth Survey (NYS). All analyses were based on the

1625 respondents who had participated in a least one of the last four publicly-available waves. To that end, I divided the sample into males and females and replicated the analyses, reported in Chapter 4, separately for each sample. For each sex, therefore, I estimated a series of multilevel models in which time-periods were nested within individuals. As in Chapter 4, the level-1 model is intended to account for individual changes in criminal behavior across the four waves of the survey (1979, 1980, 1983, and 1986), whereas with the level-2 model is intended to explain time-stable differences in levels of offending between respondents. The above hypotheses can be evaluated by comparing the results from the two samples. Since these analyses are conducted on separate samples of men and women, comparison of results obtained from the level-1 models can be used to assess the hypothesis that gender moderates the impact of marriage on changes in criminal behavior. The results obtained from the level-2 models, on the other hand, provide an assessment of the degree to which marriage can distinguish offenders from non-offenders among women as effectively as it does among men.

All variables were measured as described in Chapter 4. Specifically, I measured crime as involvement in one or more of the following offences: drug sales, felony assault, felony theft, minor assault, minor theft, prostitution, robbery and public disorder. Marriage and cohabitation were measured using dichotomous indicators of whether the respondent reported living with his or her spouse or partner for the majority of previous year. To control for ethnic differences in crime, I included two dichotomous indicators of Black and Hispanic ethnicity. Other ethnic identities formed the reference category.

As in Chapter 4, the level-2 or between-individual models included, as independent variables, the two dichotomous indicators of ethnicity in addition to marital status. Marital status in the between-individual models, as in Chapter 4, is measured as each respondent's average score on the dichotomous indicators of cohabitation and marriage over the four waves of the survey. Hence, the results of the level-2 models assess the relationship between the proportion of time spent in marriage and cohabitation and between-individual differences in the probability of committing one or more offences (Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995). By contrast, the level-1 models estimate the effects of marriage on within-individual changes in criminal offending. Again, as in Chapter 4, I calculated the difference between each respondent's time-varying indicator



of marital status (or marital status and relationship quality) and his or her average score. I then included these deviation scores as independent predictors in the model. In addition, controls for age were also included in the level-1 models. This approach provides estimate of the effects of marriage and cohabitation on involvement in crime that are unbiased by time-stable differences in individual characteristics (Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995, Brame, Bushway, and Paternoster 1999).

Analyses were conducted using logistic regression analysis. In the baseline models, the effects of cohabitation and marriage were assessed without regard for the characteristics of either relationship. In the extended analyses, I included indicators of the quality of cohabiting and marital relationships to assess the role of relationship quality in moderating their effects on crime. In particular, the results of the extended models provide a direct assessment of the impact of being in a high-quality relationship on within-individual changes in crime separately for men and women. Unfortunately, it was not possible to include measures of the social orientations of spouses in these analyses because the survey items used to measure their attitudes toward crime were only included in the 1983 and 1986 surveys. As a result, the only way to examine possible sex differences in the contingent effects of spousal social orientation and relationship quality would have been to replicate the analyses presented in Chapter 5 separately for men and women. Since those analyses were conducted on a reduced sample, dividing the sample further would have reduced its size below acceptable levels (Long 1997).

## **Results**

Table 6.1 presents the results of the two baseline models in which I estimated the effects of marriage and cohabitation on between-individual and within-individual differences in offending separately for men and women. As can be seen, there are some notable differences in the estimated effects of the independent variables in the analyses of male and female offending. For example, in the level-1 analyses, the two indicators of age (i.e. age and age-squared) have no discernible effects on the likelihood that men will commit crime. However, among women, both indicators of age are correlated with within-individual changes in offending. These findings intimate that, in contrast to men,

the relationship between age and crime among women is curvilinear and mimics the aggregate patterns observed in the general population. Whatever the other results might suggest about the relationship between marriage and desistance among women, that these patterns are not observed among the male sample, but are found in the female sample even after controlling for the effects of marriage, implies that the factors that can fully account for patterns of offending among women are not to be found in Table 6.1. The factors that explain why women desist from crime may not be the same as those for men.

These important differences notwithstanding, there appears to be little support for the proposition that marriage (or cohabitation) affects criminal involvement among men and women in different ways. Table 6.1 indicates that the effects of marriage and cohabitation on the likelihood of desistance are not vastly different for men and women. Irrespective of the sex of the respondent, neither entering a cohabiting relationship nor entering marriage was associated with disengagement from crime. In the case of marriage, the coefficient estimates of the effects of marriage on within-individual changes in the odds of committing an offense did not differ significantly for men and women. More importantly, however, entry into marriage did not have a significant effect on desistance among men or women. As for cohabitation, despite differences in the magnitude of the coefficients pertaining to the estimated effects of entering a cohabiting relationship, the results of Table 6.1 confirm those reported in Chapter 4. Cohabitation failed to predict desistance from crime among either the men or women in the sample.

The similarities in the estimated relationships (or lack thereof) between crime, marriage and cohabitation were also observed with respect to between-individual differences in crime. Irrespective of sex, those individuals who spent more time in cohabiting relationships, on average, were more likely to be involved in crime. Indeed, the coefficients corresponding to the estimated impact of cohabitation on between-individual differences in offending among men and women were not statistically different from one another. As for marriage, as can be seen in Table 6.1, respondents who were married for a greater proportion of the survey years were not less likely to report committing crime in 1979, 1980, 1983, and 1986. That this applied to both men and women provides further reinforcement for the absence of genuine sex differences in the links between marriage and criminal and delinquent behavior.

Of course, the results presented above relate to the categorical effects of marriage (or cohabitation) on offending. As indicated in Chapters 4 and 5, however, the effects of adult family relationships on crime are contingent on the characteristics of those relationships. In so far as the likelihood of entering a high-quality cohabiting relationship might vary across the sexes, it is possible that failure to take account of the conditional nature of the marital effect may have led me to exaggerate its similarities across the two samples. Hence, Table 6.2 presents the results of the extended models, in which I estimated the effects of entering and being in low-quality, medium-quality, and high-quality marriages and cohabiting relationships separately for men and women.

The results of the level-2 models shown in Table 6.2 provide a slightly different impression of the relationships between cohabitation, marriage and crime than that reported in Chapter 4. In particular, Table 6.2 indicates that men and women who spent longer periods of time in cohabiting relationships are more likely to be involved in crime, irrespective the quality of those relationships. Indeed, whereas the results reported earlier suggested that only those individuals in low-quality cohabiting relationships were more likely to be involved in crime, the level-2 model in Table 6.2 indicates that men and women in medium-quality and high-quality cohabiting relationships, respectively, were also more likely to commit crime than their single or married counterparts.

These differences aside, the more pertinent conclusion to be drawn from Table 6.2 is that the links between marital status and between-individual differences in crime are roughly similar for both men and women. For both men and women, spending longer periods of time in cohabiting relationships, appears to be associated with an increased likelihood of being involved in crime. By contrast, men and women who spent longer periods of time in high-quality marriages were significantly less likely to be involved in crime. Thus, marriage and high-quality marriage, in particular, can distinguish female offenders from non-offenders as successfully as it distinguishes among males.

In contrast to the level-2 models, the results of the level-1 models do point to some apparent differences in the effects of marriage and cohabitation on male and female criminal behavior. The first notable difference is that the coefficient estimates pertaining to the impact of entry into a high-quality cohabiting relationship or a low-quality marriage differ for men and women. In the case of high-quality cohabitation, for men, the

coefficient is negative, whereas for women it is positive. In the case of low-quality marriage, the coefficient estimates differ in magnitude, if not direction. While these results could hint at some meaningful sex differences in the effects of these relationships, a more appropriate interpretation is that these apparent differences are substantively meaningless. Entry into both a high-quality cohabiting relationship and a low-quality marriage fail to exert any discernible effects on criminal behavior among either men or women. Thus, irrespective of any statistical differences in the direction or magnitude of these coefficients, it seems more likely that the effects of high-quality cohabitation and low-quality marriage on male and female offenders are the same; namely, that neither type of relationship has any effect on the behavior of either men or women.

The second apparent difference between the level-1 models for the male and female samples pertains to the estimated effects of entry into high-quality marriages. Table 6.2 suggests that entry into high-quality marriage has a statistically significant effect on male offenders; specifically, it leads to a reduction in the probability of them committing one or more offences. By contrast, the estimated impact of entering a high-quality marriage on female offending is not statistically significant. Of all the results presented so far, this is the only result that might reasonably indicate that the impact of marriage on offending is moderated by sex.

However, it is important to consider this result in the context of the other findings derived from Table 6.2. The results pertaining to the impact of entry into low-quality and medium-quality marriages are clearly similar across the two sexes. Whereas low-quality marriages do not have a statistically significant effect upon the probability of desistance among either male or female offenders, entry into a medium-quality relationship is associated with a significant and comparable reduction in the likelihood of committing an offence for both male and female respondents. Taken together, these two results would suggest that relationship quality moderates the effects of marriage on criminal behavior among men and women in a very similar fashion. Sex differences in the estimated effects

of entering high-quality marriages, therefore, should not be exaggerated<sup>6</sup>. More than anything, Table 6.2 appears to suggest that marriage can promote disengagement from crime in much the same way for women as it does for men provided the relationship is characterized by strong attachment and emotional bonds between husband and wife.

### **Conclusions**

As a discipline, criminology has been accused of a kind of intellectual sexism: it has often reduced the study of crime to the study of crime committed by men and has “ignored, trivialized, or denied” analogous acts by women (Chesney-Lind and Okamoto 2001, p. 3). The exclusive concentration on male crime and delinquency arose for many of the same reasons that criminologists have tended to focus on juvenile crime and delinquency instead of studying crime as it develops over the lifespan. Since men are overwhelmingly more likely than women to be involved in crime (Steffensmeier and Allan 1996), many criminologists seem to have assumed that there was little point in investigating female offenders (Daly and Chesney-Lind 1988; Steffensmeier and Allan 1996; Chesney-Lind and Sheldon 2004). In recent decades, that view has changed considerably as the discipline has begun to pay far greater attention to female crime and delinquency (e.g. Adler 1975; Steffensmeier 1980; Steffensmeier and Allan 1996).

Despite these changes, life-course criminology has lagged behind other fields in the discipline. For one thing, several notable and influential studies of criminal and delinquent behavior over the lifespan excluded women altogether (e.g. Shover 1986; Sampson and Laub 1993; Laub and Sampson 1998; Farrington and West 1995). The end result is that much of what is known about criminal behavior over the lifespan including the causes of desistance from crime is derived from studying the criminal behavior of

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<sup>6</sup> Indeed, if there are additional life-course transitions or factors that are especially relevant to desistance among women, as I noted earlier in respect of the differences in the effects of age on male and female offending, some coefficients estimates across the sample may appear to differ as a result of differences in the residual variation of the two models (Allison 1999).

men. Other studies that have examined the behavior of men and women, have not necessarily overcome this problem because they have tended to treat sex as if it were just one of a number of explanatory variables (e.g. Warr 1998). Although these studies offer some improvement on earlier accounts, they have assumed effectively that the factors that lead to crime or desistance, including marriage, are the same for men and women.

There are a number of reasons to suspect, however, that marriage may not promote desistance to the same degree for men and women. Sex differences in rates of offending, the propensity to marry, or even the likelihood that men and women will find themselves in the kinds of relationships that are most likely to lead to desistance could ensure that marriage does not promote desistance to the same degree among women as men. In similar respects, sex differences in the meanings that men and women attach to marriage might mean that even though marriage promotes disengagement from crime for men, its effects among women are less pronounced. Finally, sex differences in the causes of criminal and delinquent behavior and consequently in the ways in which women move away from crime might also imply that sex moderates the effects of marriage on crime.

However, the results of the analyses presented in this chapter challenge the validity of these claims. Despite some likely differences in the factors that promote desistance among men and women, as indicated by sex differences in the relationship between age and crime, the evidence shown here is more consistent with the notion that marriage promotes disengagement from crime for men and women. Of course, as noted in Chapters 4 and 5, the effects of marriage on crime are not categorical; instead, they depend considerably on the characteristics of the relationship and in particular, on the level of attachment and the strength of emotional ties between partners. In fact, the apparent similarities in the ways that relationship characteristics moderate the effects of marriage on crime among both men and women lends considerable credence to the hypothesis that its crime-suppressing benefits are likely to be enjoyed by both sexes.

Of course, these results should not be taken to mean that the processes that underpin desistance from crime are entirely the same for men and women. Men and women may encounter divergent experiences in their lives and the meanings and opportunities afforded by these events, including marriage, may vary significantly across the two sexes. In addition, as a result of these differences, the reasons why marriage is

associated with desistance might vary across the population. Moreover, in light of some apparent sex differences in the way criminal behavior varies with age, it is likely that there are other factors (or life-course transitions) that are especially relevant to the desistance of female offenders. Nonetheless, as far as marriage is concerned, at least one pathway out of crime appears to be open to both men and women.

**Table 6.1: Logistic Regression (with Random Effects) Coefficient Estimates of the Effects of Marriage and Cohabitation on Desistance among Men and Women, 1979-1986**

	Men	Women	Ratio of Coefficients	$\chi^2$
Constant	2.11 (1.66)	8.20*** (1.73)	0.26	0.17
<i>Within-Individual</i>				
Age	-0.04 (0.17)	-0.92*** (0.17)	0.04	29.91***
Age2	0.00 (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)	-0.12	66808.66***
Cohabitation ( $\delta$ )	-0.03 (0.34)	0.08 (0.28)	-0.42	20.21***
Marriage ( $\delta$ )	-0.29 (0.22)	-0.25 (0.20)	1.16	0.25
<i>Between-Individual</i>				
Black	-0.47** (0.22)	0.30 (0.24)	-1.57	36.29***
Hispanic	0.35 (0.44)	0.40 (0.39)	0.87	0.05
Cohabitation	2.77*** (0.88)	1.65** (0.64)	1.68	0.18
Marriage	-0.59 (0.37)	-0.46 (0.29)	1.27	0.24
P	1.94 (0.09)	1.66 (0.10)		
$\Sigma$	0.53 (0.02)	0.46 (0.03)		
N (observations)	3058	2858		
N (cases)	857	769		
Log likelihood	-1811.94	-1508.67		

p < 0.10; \*\* p < 0.05; \*\*\* p < 0.01



**Table 6.2: Logistic Regression (with Random Effects) Coefficient Estimates of the Effects of Marriage and Cohabitation on Desistance among Men and Women, Conditional on Relationship Quality 1979-1986**

	Men	Women	Ratio of Coefficients	$\chi^2$
Constant	1.72 (1.68)	8.36*** (1.74)	0.21	0.20
<b><i>Within-Individual</i></b>				
Age	0.00 (0.17)	-0.93*** (0.18)	0.00	32.31***
Age <sup>2</sup>	0.00 (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)	-0.17	70687.93***
Cohabitation ( $\delta$ )				
<i>Low-Quality</i>	-0.38 (0.45)	-0.21 (0.42)	1.83	0.82
<i>Medium-Quality</i>	1.24* (0.67)	-0.04 (0.51)	-31.21	2.34
<i>High-Quality</i>	-0.80 (0.74)	0.63 (0.49)	-1.26	4.56**
Marriage ( $\delta$ )				
<i>Low-Quality</i>	0.32 (0.31)	0.12 (0.25)	2.58	3.50*
<i>Medium-Quality</i>	-0.51* (0.30)	-0.59** (0.30)	0.86	0.12
<i>High-Quality</i>	-0.92** (0.01)	-0.18 (0.32)	5.21	4.54**
<b><i>Between-Individual</i></b>				
Black	-0.43* (0.22)	0.31 (0.24)	-1.41	36.70***
Hispanic	0.32 (0.44)	0.39 (0.39)	0.80	0.14
Cohabitation				
<i>Low-Quality</i>	3.27** (1.32)	2.46** (1.03)	1.33	0.03
<i>Medium-Quality</i>	4.09** (1.93)	0.33 (1.43)	12.27	0.22
<i>High-Quality</i>	2.26 (2.41)	2.71** (1.25)	0.83	0.00
Marriage				
<i>Low-Quality</i>	1.19* (0.69)	0.42 (0.49)	2.87	0.83
<i>Medium-Quality</i>	-0.28 (0.77)	-1.13* (0.59)	0.24	1.49
<i>High-Quality</i>	-3.16*** (0.78)	-1.27** (0.61)	2.48	0.53

**Table 6.2 – continued.**

	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Ratio of Coefficients</b>	$\chi^2$
$\rho$	1.93	1.65		
$\sigma$	0.53	0.45		
N (observations)	3059	2858		
N (cases)	857	769		
Log likelihood	-1794.63	-1500.61		

p < 0.10; \*\* p < 0.05; \*\*\* p < 0.01

## CHAPTER 7

Criminologists have long-recognized the importance of the family in explaining crime and delinquency (Nye 1958). Family environments are among the major foci of some of the most prominent theories of crime causation (e.g. Hirschi 1969, Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990, Agnew 1992) and the empirical links between crime and family characteristics are well established (Nye 1958; Hirschi 1969; Loeber and Stouthaber-Loeber 1986; Sampson and Laub 1993; Wright and Cullen 2001). While much of this research has concentrated on the role of family environments in the development of childhood and adolescent antisocial behavior, researchers increasingly have acknowledged the influence of families on criminal behavior among adults (Sampson and Laub 1993; Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998; Laub and Sampson 2003). Despite some initial skepticism, the results of this emerging research agenda have shown with considerable consistency that marital relationships help restrain adult crime (Farrington and West 1995, Sampson and Laub 1993, Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998, Warr 1998). In fact, since marriage is negatively associated with criminal involvement even among those with a history of wrong-doing, marriage is regarded by some as among the most important developments in desistance from crime (Laub and Sampson 2003).

Despite the empirical evidence that marital relationships play a significant role in helping some offenders turn their backs on crime, several key issues remain unresolved in the extant literature. First, are other types of adult family relationships also likely to promote desistance from crime? More particularly, do “the crime suppression benefits of marriage extend to those involved in cohabitation or other arrangements” (Laub, Sampson, and Wimer 2006, p. 469)? Despite the consistency with which marriage has been implicated empirically in the desistance process (Meisenhelder 1977; Gibbens 1984; Sampson and Laub 1993; Farrington and West 1995; Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995; Laub and Sampson 2003; Sampson, Laub and Wimer 2006; King, Massoglia, and MacMillan 2007), the evidence that analogous family relationships also constrain crime has been much more mixed. Although some studies have indicated that cohabitation has no effect on desistance from crime (Yamguchi and Kandel 1985a, 1985b; Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995, Warr 1998), research based on in-depth interviews with

desisting offenders has documented the capacity of non-marital cohabiting relationships to promote changes in criminal and delinquent behavior (Shover 1983; Hughes 1998; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; Gadd and Farrell 2004).

Second, notwithstanding the extensive empirical evidence in support of a relationship between marriage and desistance from crime (Meisenhelder 1977; Gibbens 1984; Sampson and Laub 1993; Farrington and West 1995; Horney, Osgood, and Marshall 1995; Laub and Sampson 2003; Sampson, Laub and Wimer 2006; King, Massoglia, and MacMillan 2007), there remains some ambiguity in the literature as to why marriage helps promote desistance. There are several possible explanations that are cited in the literature (Laub and Sampson 2003; Sampson, Laub and Wimer 2006), but very little is actually known regarding the degree to which all or any of these explanations apply in the lives of offenders. This is due largely to the fact that very few studies have sought to evaluate these explanations against one another or the theories emphasizing them, preferring instead to concentrate on demonstrating the empirical relationship between marriage and crime (e.g. Farrington and West 1995; Laub and Sampson 2003; Sampson, Laub and Wimer 2006). When they have, they have tested them in ways that paid insufficient attention to the need to rule out rival hypotheses and explanations (Warr 1998; Maume, Ousey, and Beaver 2005).

Third, researchers do not fully comprehend why some marriages are more likely than others to steer individuals away from crime. The impact of marriage on crime is clearly not categorical as has already been noted, but beyond an awareness that only “good” marriages seem to matter, researchers have not managed to illuminate the limits of marriage as a potential catalyst of desistance. For example, do the positive benefits of marriage also apply to women? Most of the literature documenting the links between marriage and crime is derived from studies of offending among male populations (e.g. Sampson and Laub 1994; Farrington and West 1995; Laub and Sampson 2003). Given that sex and gender may play especially prominent roles in the development of criminal and delinquent behavior and in the ways that people experience marriage, sex could be an important factor in helping to understand the limits of marriage as a cause of desistance.

The purpose of this dissertation has been to help redress these shortcomings and to provide some answers to these lingering questions. In it, I examined: first, the extent to

which both marriage and cohabitation can contribute to desistance; second, the theoretical mechanisms through which marriage promotes behavioral change, and third, the degree to which these relationships foster desistance for both men and women. Despite some limitations to the study, my answers to these questions have helped provide a more complete impression of the role of marriage in the desistance process. To that end, the three empirical studies that comprise Chapters 4, 5 and 6 have helped also to yield a more refined understanding of some of the ways in which transformative life-events can deflect individuals away from their lives of crime and delinquency.

### **Does Cohabitation Promote Desistance?**

In Chapter 4, I examined the extent to which cohabitation can help promote desistance from crime. In contrast to prior studies of the relationship between cohabitation and crime, I sought to investigate the extent to which the effects of cohabitation on crime are contingent on the level of attachment between partners and the strength of their emotional bonds. To that end, a specific goal of Chapter 4 was to understand whether similarities between the effects of marriage and cohabitation may have been obscured by variations in their effects across the population.

Despite finding that relationship quality moderates the effects of marriage on crime, the results of Chapter 4 indicated that it has little impact on the relationship between cohabitation and crime. Irrespective of the level of attachment between partners, the experience of entering and maintaining a cohabitating relationship has no effect on the likelihood that an individual will have committed one or more offenses. In fact, the only finding to suggest that cohabitation had any relevance for criminal behavior was the conclusion that people who remain in cohabiting relationships for longer periods of time are more likely than others to be involved in crime and delinquency.

### **Why Does Marriage Promote Desistance?**

In Chapter 5, I sought to evaluate some of the mechanisms through which

marriage is hypothesized to promote desistance. These mechanisms included the development of social bonds and emotional interdependence, reductions in exposure to delinquent peers, and changes in self-perception. Each of these mechanisms is emphasized by one of three theories of desistance: social control; social learning theory; and the theory of cognitive transformation. Thus, in evaluating these mechanisms, a key objective of Chapter 5 was to test empirically the three theories of desistance as explanations for why marriage affects involvement in crime. In contrast to prior efforts to evaluate these explanations, in Chapter 5, I sought to isolate the empirical predictions that are unique to each perspective as well as those that are common to all three theories.

One of the most important results to have emerged from this investigation was that the impact of marriage on desistance is conditional on the quality of the relationship as well as the social orientation of the partner. This result is especially important because it further clarifies the limits of marriage as a facilitator of desistance. Even the most optimistic observers of the marital effect acknowledge that it is not the act of matrimony that helps divert offenders from their lives of crime, but the nature of the marital relationship that determines the likelihood of change (Laub et al 1998, Laub and Sampson 2003). In particular, a number of studies have indicated that the effects of marriage on desistance are due to the effects of marital attachment on crime (Sampson and Laub 1993; Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998; Maume, Ousey, and Beaver 2005). Very few studies, however, have placed much importance on the social orientations of the partner and those that have done so appear to have emphasized its importance over that of attachment (e.g. Cernkovich, Giordano, and Rudolph 2002; Simons et al 2002). The results presented in Chapter 4 indicate that both the social orientation of the partner and the quality of the marital relationship matter: in the absence of either, marriage has no effect on the likelihood that an individual will desist from crime.

In terms of the actual mechanism through which marriage affects desistance, the results of Chapter 4 are consistent with the proposition that marriage promotes disengagement from crime by establishing the informal social control of the individual (Sampson and Laub 1993; Laub and Sampson 2003), and by reducing an individual's exposure to criminal peers (Warr 1998). In other words, the impact of marriage on desistance is not attributable entirely to either informal social control or social network

change (e.g. Sampson and Laub 1993; Warr 1998). As explanations for the effects of marriage on desistance, these results are consistent with social control theory and social learning theories. By contrast, Chapter 5 revealed only limited support for the propositions of the theory of cognitive transformations, at least as far as they relate to explaining the relationship between marriage and desistance. Even though marriage is associated with changes in reflected appraisals and, by assumption, in how individuals perceive themselves, these and other indicators of cognitive transformations fail to distinguish re-offenders from desisting offenders once other factors are taken into account. Thus, there is little evidence to support the mechanism described by that theory.

### **Does Marriage Promote Desistance among Men and Women?**

In Chapter 6, I examined the extent to which the effects of marriage on crime were moderated by sex. In doing so, I also took account of possible sex differences in the relevance of relationship quality as a conditioning factor. Sex differences in rates of offending, the propensity to marry, or even the likelihood that men and women will find themselves in the types of relationships that are most likely to lead to desistance could undermine the ability of marriage to promote desistance among women. Moreover, sex differences in the meanings that men and women attach to marriage might mean that even though marriage promotes disengagement from crime for men, its effects among women are less pronounced. Many commentators have argued also that the causes of female criminal behavior are different from the causes of male crime (e.g. Chesney-Lind and Sheldon 2004); hence, marriage may play no part in desistance by female offenders.

The results of Chapter 6 challenge the validity of these claims and suggest that marriage promotes disengagement from crime for men and women. In fact, Chapter 6 suggests that marriage affects crime among women in markedly similar ways to how it affects crime among male offenders. In particular, among female offenders, the impact of marriage on desistance is conditional on the quality of the marital relationship in much the same way as it is for men. While these results do not necessarily imply that the processes that underpin desistance from crime are entirely the same for men and women, they do suggest that the crime-suppressing benefits of marriage can be enjoyed by both

sexes.

### **Limitations of the Study**

A key limitation of this study is that it fails to take account of the process by which individuals select into marriage or cohabitation. Neither marriage nor cohabitation is an entirely randomly-occurring event. More importantly, even if both types of relationships are made possible by some degree of serendipity, it is likely that a number of factors play a systematic part in determining whether individuals are unable to develop the kinds of marriages that are most likely to promote desistance from crime. As I noted in Chapter 3, some of these factors may be related to the time-stable characteristics of individuals. In those situations, even if I have not been able to measure those characteristics directly, I have at least been able to exclude them as possible explanations for the observed effects of marriage on desistance from crime. The same has not been possible, however, with respect to time-varying factors that might influence the ability of an individual to form a high-quality relationship with a pro-social partner. These factors, in so far as they are unobserved, cannot be excluded as rival explanations for the patterns observed.

As noted in Chapter 4, to the extent that this is a problem, it is most likely to be relevant to the study of the impact of cohabitation on crime. Given the interrelationships between cohabitation, marriage, and relationship quality, it is possible that I have underestimated the impact of cohabitation on desistance. Although, as I also noted in Chapter 4, this seems less likely in light of the other findings or conclusions of this dissertation, further research using analytical methods that are able to model the selection process is required in order to rule out this hypothesis more definitively.

### **Theoretical Implications**

Given that the changes in criminal behavior that accompany these events are believed to be lasting changes, these life events have been labeled by many researchers as



“turning points” in the life-course and the associations between these events and subsequent patterns of criminal and delinquent behavior has led to the emergence of a theoretical perspective that emphasizes the importance of turning points in understanding changes in crime as they occur over the life-course. Although the term is rarely defined (e.g. Sampson and Laub 1993, Laub and Sampson 2003; Hughes 1998), its meaning can be inferred from the context of its application and its meaning in normal parlance. In general, turning points refer to discrete periods in the life of an individual during which the future course of some pre-existing pattern of development is altered. The most important defining characteristic of a turning point, therefore, is its relationship to prior patterns of development. The second most important characteristic of a turning point is that it is discrete. Turning points, as distinct from turning periods or transitions, comprise moments at which the individual actually changes life direction in one way or another.

The idea that marriage constitutes a turning point in the lives of many offenders is an appealing one largely because it draws attention to the role that marriage plays in establishing behavioral change. As Laub and Sampson (2003) note, turning points are not the same thing as “major life experiences or expectable transitions” (Laub and Sampson 2003, p. 40). Not all life experiences result in change; indeed, as noted in this dissertation, although high-quality marriages to pro-social spouses can promote desistance, other seemingly analogous relationships have no such effect. In that sense, turning points are not just manifestations of change: they are among its principal causes.

The notion that change should be defined in relation to expected patterns of development, however, requires some description of the direction in which the individuals is likely to travel. This requires that an initial pattern or direction can be established, prior to the occurrence of the turning point, and that any change is followed by some continuity. Indeed, as Abbott (1997, p. 89) notes, “what makes a turning point a turning point rather than a minor ripple is the passage of sufficient time ‘on a new course’ such that it is clear that direction has indeed been changed”. Of course, as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, in trying to study desistance, there is always the risk of inferring that a person has desisted even if she or he has merely abstained from crime and delinquency temporarily. Moreover, in light of the sporadic nature of criminal behavior (Matza 1964, Glaser 1967), it may be just as difficult to establish the expected patterns of development.

It is perhaps not surprising therefore, that some of the most direct evidence of turning points has emerged from qualitative interviews with desisting offenders who have described their own transitions away from crime in terms of turning points such as marriage (e.g. Laub and Sampson 2003). In large-scale, statistical analyses, however, such as those presented in this dissertation, it is difficult to conceive of a way to identify turning points given the need to monitor behavior for a significant period of time as well as the importance of observing subsequent stability in the developmental progression. Although the analytical strategy used in Chapters 4 and 6 can make some headway towards the resolution of this and related problems, at most, I was only able to monitor the behavior of respondents over a seven-year period. There is always the possibility that the changes in criminal offending that accompanied marriage were short-lived.

The contingent nature of the marital effect further undermines the usefulness of a concept such as that of turning points. Presumably, the development of high-quality marriages takes some time. That is not to say that marital attachment necessarily improves over time, but it does suggest that the effects of getting married are likely to be gradual. It could be that offenders establish high-quality relationships, choose to marry their partners and, as part of the complete transition, experience a series of associated changes that make their continued involvement in crime less likely. Alternatively, it may be that active offenders get married and then gradually become more attached to their partners. As they experience these changes, they then undergo a number of other transformations that decrease their chances of criminal involvement.

In neither case would offenders experience the kinds of abrupt shifts in direction that are implied by the concept of a turning point. In the first instance, it seems more likely that the change process commences even before the couple married even if the outward manifestations of the change do not become apparent until much later in the life of the relationship. In the second scenario, the turn might not even begin until after the couple married and their relationship started to mature. Although some of the proponents of the concept of turning points have acknowledged the gradual nature of these changes (e.g. Laub, Nagin, and Sampson 1998; Laub and Sampson 2003), in so far as they continue to use the concept they have not fully acknowledged its implications. If marriage affects crime through a process that, just like the process of desistance, develops

gradually over time and the beginning and end of which cannot be easily defined, then it makes little sense to describe that change as occurring at or around a single point. It seems more accurate and useful to describe the effects of marriage in terms of an open-ended process of change or transition.

Perhaps a more useful way to conceptualize the effects of life events on changes in criminal behavior over the life-course is to focus on life-course transitions. Defined as phases of development in which individuals assume new personal and social roles that affect different facets of their lives, including their involvement in crime, the concept of life-course transitions avoids the need to focus on discrete events and their effects on long-term changes in development. One the chief advantages of the concept of focusing on transitions is that doing so makes very few assumptions about the nature of change; that is, it implies that change can be abrupt or gradual, short-lived or permanent. At the same time, the concept of a life-course transition highlights the role of such changes in promoting changes in criminal and delinquent behavior.

The concept of a transition also more accurately describes the effects of marriage on crime because, as indicated in Chapter 5, marriage appears to influence desistance by provoking a series of related changes. For example, part of the reason why individuals who enter high-quality marriages to pro-social spouses are less likely to engage in crime is that they are also more likely to experience reductions in their exposure to criminal and delinquent friends. These changes appear also to be associated with attitudinal change; specifically, those who abandon their delinquent friends are also likely to become less supportive of crime. Irrespective of which of these changes is the more consequential, the overall point to be made is that marriage probably constitutes more than a single turning point; instead, it probably consists of many.

### **Implications for Criminal Justice Policy**

Following the publication of *Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives*, a number of newspapers and media sources reported the results of Laub and Sampson's (2003) landmark study. In doing so, however, they seemed to place disproportionate emphasis on their finding that marriage did promote desistance from crime among many former

offenders. Indeed, the running head of many of these articles seemed to suggest that marriage worked in a way that most criminal justice initiatives did not. On the one hand, this sort of dissemination of the results of such an important research study is desirable. At the same time there is always the risk that the results of social science research could be misinterpreted or misapplied by policy-makers who are keen to latch onto some key findings at the expense of others.

In democratic polities it may be difficult to conceive of marriage as a policy intervention. Governments and policy-makers can hardly assign subjects to marriages, but they can make changes that make marital relationships more or less preferable to other types of relationships. For example, many scholars have argued that the extension of social welfare systems in many countries throughout the 1960s and 1970s has had dramatic effects on the numbers of children born and raised in single-parent families (Murray 1984). Thus, by altering the eligibility of specific government programs, policy-makers can alter the nature of family institutions. At the same time, they can also change the laws so as to discourage other family relationships such as cohabitation. In recent years, there has been heated debate in the United States over the status of same-sex marriages that has resulted in the introduction of legislation and litigation in many states aimed at altering the legality of marriages between gay men and women. Even though much of the debate may be ideologically-motivated, it clearly indicates that the state is able and is seen to be legitimate in its efforts to alter patterns of family formation.

In the United States, state and federal governments have used state institutions to try to bolster the importance of marriage and the image of the family, preferred by social conservatives, at the expense of alternative family structures (Carlson et al 2004; Fitzgerald and Rebar 2004). While some of these policies may be based on the careful and critical deliberation of research, in many cases they are also based on the deep-seated ideological convictions of major party activists (e.g. Layman 2001). In fact, selectivity in the way even informed policy statements have made use of the extant research literature highlights the importance of preconceived policy agendas in determining how the results of social scientific research is used (e.g. Popenoe and Whitehead 2002). In such an environment, therefore, there is a constant risk that research demonstrating the beneficial effects of marriage or traditional family structures may be used to sell a preconceived

policy program, especially if such research also highlights the advantages of marriage over other family arrangements<sup>7</sup>. Thus, in discussing some of the policy implications of this project, I think it is necessary to begin by stating some important stipulations and admonitions.

From the standpoint of the criminal justice system, there are some inherent dangers in developing policies that merely promote the importance of marriage. Even if marriage helps suppress criminal involvement for the majority of offenders, it might lead to an escalation of criminal activity for others. For instance, the results of the analyses presented in Chapter 4 suggested that individuals who spent longer periods of time in low-quality marriages were more likely than others to report some involvement in crime. Since this finding is based on between-individual differences in crime, it may reflect a heightened tendency for active offenders to be in dysfunctional marital relationships. However, the alternative explanation, that spending longer periods of time in a low-quality relationship promotes involvement in crime, cannot be excluded.

The mundanely obvious example of an exception to the crime-stopping effects of marriage is domestic violence. To argue that the difference between a marriage characterized by desistance and one characterized by marital violence is the degree of attachment or the quality of the marital bond is hardly useful. Without knowing why some individuals are able to develop high-quality marriages while others are not, efforts to promote marriage for the sake of promoting desistance should exercise considerable caution. The development of policies aimed at encouraging serious and persistent offenders to marry may, in some situations, have devastating consequences. The example of domestic violence is just one example of the possible dangers of promoting policies when the consequences of those policies are not fully understood.

At the same time, an over-emphasis on marriage as being the harbinger of desistance could lead to missed opportunities to foster positive changes in the lives on

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<sup>7</sup> Irrespective of the legitimacy or state involvement in the affairs of families, it is important to differentiate between policies that are suggested by the results of research and those that are preconceived or predetermined that seek to utilize the results of independent research as justification for their implementation.

unmarried offenders. Although I could not find any evidence to support the contention that entering and maintaining high-quality cohabiting relationships promote disengagement from crime, as noted in Chapter 4, it is possible that the tendency for higher-quality cohabiting relationships to turn into marriages might have led me to underestimate the impact of cohabitation on desistance. Even if this interpretation appears unlikely in the context of the other results obtained in Chapters 4 and Chapter 6, before it can be ruled out more definitively, policy-makers should avoid developing policies aimed at strengthening marriage by undermining cohabitation. This seems especially important given that many good marriages may begin as high-quality cohabiting relationships.

More importantly, without knowing why cohabitation fails to promote desistance, any policy that aims to undermine non-traditional family arrangements in order to encourage desistance among active offenders is likely to fail. As noted in chapter 4, there are two broad differences between marriage and cohabitation that might explain why only marriage is capable of engendering changes in criminal behavior: first, the two types of relationships differ in terms of their legal standings; and second, the social norms and expectations that regulate behavior within these relationships may differ, in part, because cohabitation is a less developed social institution. The more cohabitation can imitate marriage, the more likely it is to promote desistance. From that perspective, policies aimed at weakening cohabitation as a social arrangement may actually further weaken its ability to promote desistance from crime. The more our society denigrates cohabitation as an institution, the more it may just widen the gap between the two types of relationship.

Although we should resist the efforts of policy-makers and activists to use their research in order to justify preconceived policy preferences, we should also recognize that the results of criminological research will often be used in such a way. In these situations, perhaps the most pragmatic approach is to ensure those policies are as fully and properly informed as possible, irrespective of their origins. Thus, while I do not think that the results of this research necessarily beckon policies that would aim to further institutionalize marriage or de-legitimize cohabitation, there are a number of tangible ways in which policy-makers might promote marriage as a source of desistance in the

lives of active offenders. In doing so, the overriding principle that should guide the policy development should be, first and foremost, to do no harm.

One approach that may yield some success in terms of promoting marriage as a source of desistance is to concentrate on minimizing the harmful consequences of existing criminal justice policies on the development and maintenance of adult family relationships. There is some evidence that prior involvement in crime appears to reduce the probability that an individual will marry (Laub, Sampson, and Wimer 2006; King, Massoglia, and MacMillan 2007). In addition, research also indicates that incarceration can have a particularly negative effect on marriage (Pettit and Western 2004; Huebner 2005). Part of the deleterious impact of imprisonment on marriage could be indirect<sup>8</sup>. However, there are ways in which the experience of imprisonment may also directly damage the individual's chances of establishing a high-quality marriage or his or her ability to sustain a pre-existing marriage.

Two features of imprisonment are especially relevant. First, imprisonment involves the physical isolation of the prisoner from almost everyone other than the employees of the prison and other inmates. The isolation of the inmate population is also confounded by the placement of prisons in areas that often are distant from population centers, thereby reducing the ability of prisoners and their families to maintain contact. As Sykes (1958) noted, in the maximum security prison in Trenton, almost two-thirds of inmates had not received any visits in the previous year. Second, imprisonment also involves the separation of the sexes. Men and women are incarcerated in single-sex institutions and in the Federal prison system and forty-four of the fifty states this separation of sexes is taken to illogical extremes. Inmates in those jurisdictions are not entitled to private family or conjugal visits, meaning that even if they are visited by their husbands, wives, boyfriends, or girlfriends, their ability to maintain physical contact is often limited and almost always takes place under the watchful eye of prison guards

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<sup>8</sup> For example, in so far as imprisonment reduces the individual's hopes for employment it may also reduce his or her chances of getting married. In similar respects, it might also be that imprisonment stigmatizes the individual and in doing so reduces his or her appeal as a marriage partner.

(Hopper 2001). Given that inmates taking part in conjugal visitation programs report greater levels of closeness and intimacy with their families (Carlson and Cervera 1991), at the very least, increasing the opportunities for inmates to spend time with their families in normal family environment could have a significant impact on their ability to maintain high-quality marriages and eventually disengage from crime.

More broadly, however, recognizing the potential importance of marriage in promoting desistance among active offenders suggests that more attention should be directed towards reducing the isolating effects of imprisonment. This principle is especially important in the lives of offenders who are already married. For them, special efforts could be made to ensure that they are incarcerated in areas as close as possible to their families. Better still, perhaps greater efforts could be made to control married felons without resorting to imprisonment through the use of effective alternatives to imprisonment such as electronic monitoring (Padgett, Bales, and Blomberg 2006). At the same time, enabling unmarried offenders the opportunity to meet and interact with conventional others would surely provide them with better chances of developing the necessary social ties that might enable them to desist from crime on their release.

Of course, one of the most important conclusions to emerge from this project is that the effects of marriage on crime depend on the quality of the relationship and the social orientation of the spouse. Thus, if policies are to be developed so as to strengthen the importance of marriage, attention should also be given to helping active offenders develop effective marriages; that is, marriages to pro-social partners that are characterized by high levels of attachment and strong emotional bonds. Although diversionary programs as well as those aimed at assisting prisoner re-entry often emphasize cognitive training, programs aimed at helping individual offenders develop the kinds of skills required to sustain healthy, functional romantic relationships may even be more effective in terms of helping those offenders desist from crime in the future.



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