

# Chapter 13

## Desistance from Crime: Toward an Integrated Conceptualization for Intervention

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### Introduction

The idea that sexual offending is a symptom of an underlying fixed and stable propensity to commit sexually deviant acts is prevalent among the public, but also among policymakers and practitioners (e.g., Letourneau & Miner, 2005; Simon, 1998). In that context, perhaps, it is not surprising that the topic of desistance from sexual offending is only beginning to emerge and spark interest among scholars and practitioners. In the current criminal justice model, much emphasis has been put over the years on community protection and risk management, including the reliance on actuarial risk assessment and risk prediction with adult sex offenders (Feeley & Simon, 1992). In fact, probably no subgroup of individuals has been affected more by this actuarial justice model than those convicted for a sexual offense (Simon, 1998). The new penology and its emphasis on risk management rather than rehabilitation has had important policy ramifications and implications for the prevention of sexual violence and abuse. Indeed, criminal justice policies have been increasingly focused on community protection (Petrunik, 2002, 2003; Murphy et al., 2009). If the vast majority of individuals convicted for a sexual offense eventually return the community, then issues surrounding their community reentry and community reintegration needs to be on the agenda. Currently, the actuarial-based community protection model, is concerned with the identification of risk factors statistically associated with sexual recidivism and the clinical assessment of these risk factors to make valid and reliable prediction of future offending of individuals (e.g., Quinsey, Rice, & Harris, 1995). Clinical researchers and

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practitioners have raised issues and concerns with this static perspective of risk, and, as a result, the field of sexual violence and abuse has witnessed the gradual introduction of a more dynamic view which includes dynamic risk factors and treatment/intervention needs to guide the case management of offenders and modify the risk of sexual reoffending (Hanson & Harris, 2000, 2001). In spite of the emergence of a more dynamic view of offending, the underlying assumption that this group of individuals always remain at some risk of sexual reoffending, albeit at different level, remains. This probabilistic view is no stranger to the fact that the concept of desistance from sex offending has been relatively absent from the scientific literature in the field of sexual violence and abuse (e.g., Lussier & Cale, 2013). It is telling that risk assessors are routinely assessing the probability of sexually reoffending, yet remain relatively silent about desistance from sex offending (notable exceptions, Laws & Ward, 2011; Robbé, Mann, Maruna, & Thornton, 2014; Worling & Langton, 2014). Yet prospective longitudinal research has repeatedly shown that most, if not all offenders, eventually desist from crime at some point over their life course.

Every time an individual comes into contact with the criminal justice system, their level of service in terms of risk factors and intervention needs increase. This is true especially for young offenders which emphasizes the importance of identifying key desistance factors early on. As a result, and because of the important discontinuity of offending around that period, desistance research has focused mostly on the adolescence–adulthood transition (e.g., Mulvey et al., 2004). This early adulthood age stage is critical given the long-standing age–crime curve perspective that identified a substantial downward trend in prevalence of general offending around this time (e.g., Farrington, 1986). In other words, most youth involved in juvenile delinquency do not go on to pursue an adult criminal career, quite the contrary. Recent studies, however, suggest that this downward trend toward the end of adolescence may not characterize all types of offenders (e.g., Loeber, Farrington, Stouthamer-Loeber, & White, 2008). In other words, the age–crime curve may not be the same for all offenders and offense types (Sampson & Laub, 2003) and desistance from crime may be characterized by different paths (Lussier & Gress, 2014). That said, Mulvey et al. (2004) identified a fundamental limitation when they asserted that previous longitudinal studies have provided minimal understanding and policy guidelines concerning offenders in the “deep end” of the criminal justice system. While research on more serious subgroups of offenders, especially chronic offenders (e.g., Loeber & Farrington, 1998), has dramatically increased in the past two decades with regard to desistance, other subgroups such as those having committed a violent offense (e.g., Corrado, 2002; Tzoumakis, Lussier, Le Blanc, & Davies, 2012) and/or a sexual offense (e.g., Lussier & Blokland, 2014; Lussier, Van Den Berg, Bijleveld, & Hendriks, 2012; McCuish, Lussier, & Corrado, 2015) remain under-researched. The relative absence of research for this subgroup is telling of the underlying assumption that these serious offenders remain at-risk of violent and/or sexual offending over long-time periods. Yet, in their seminal study, Sampson and Laub (2003) concluded that desistance was the norm even among serious and persistent offenders. Their study highlighted that previous offending record had little predictive validity regarding lifelong patterns of offending. In other words, the most

criminogenic profiles do not guarantee a lifelong pattern of chronic serious and violent offending. These assertions have several important theoretical, empirical, methodological, and policy implications.

The concept of desistance from crime emerged in the scientific literature in the late 1970s in the writings of criminal career researchers who were concerned with the description and understanding the whole longitudinal sequence of individual offending (e.g., Blumstein, Cohen, Roth, & Visher, 1986; Le Blanc & Fréchette, 1989). For criminal career researchers, the factors responsible for the onset, course, and termination of offending were said to be relatively different. In other words, individuals do not stop offending for the same reasons that they start offending or escalate to more serious forms of crimes. While this concept seems relatively straightforward, scholars have approached desistance differently over the years. Several innovative studies aimed to describe and explain desistance from crime among youth emerging from the corpus of developmental life course paradigm have been conducted. The generalizability of the various desistance hypotheses that have utilized longitudinal data from general and at-risk youth drawn from schools, however, has been questioned. While this research, very importantly, has identified factors associated with desistance around the adolescence–adulthood transition, these findings are not necessarily generalizable to certain subgroups of youth involved in serious, chronic, violent and/or sex offending. Most importantly, the representative samples as well as those based on at-risk youth are not likely to include many chronic juvenile offenders, young murderers, gang members, or juvenile sex offenders. In other words, both theoretically and in policy terms, it is unclear whether the current state of knowledge on desistance is readily generalizable to those youth involved in the most serious forms of crimes or presenting the most serious patterns of offending. More specifically, the current state of knowledge is rather limited regarding these “special categories” of young offenders, therefore limiting the possibility of drawing specific policy recommendations for the most serious juvenile offenders (e.g., Rosenfeld, White, & Esbensen, 2012). In that regard, Cernkovich and Giordano (2001) confirmed that social bonding mechanisms appear to operate on general samples, but not with institutionalized samples of offenders, which includes more serious offenders. Policy recommendations are also significantly limited by the lack of a general consensus between scholars regarding the conceptual definition of desistance. Indeed, researchers have mainly defined desistance from crime as an event or a process. It is unclear, however, whether the conceptualization of desistance either as an event or a process adequately represents the phenomena for all individuals involved in sexual offenses.

## The Conceptualization of Desistance from Crime

Among criminologists, there is a lack of a general agreement as to what constitute desistance from crime. According to the Merriam-Webster, to desist refers to someone who ceases something. This term comes from the French word *désister* which

refers to someone voluntarily giving up something (e.g., a right, a claim, a legal proceeding). The English term is more behavioral-focused as it implies the termination of a particular behavior, whereas the original French term is focused on a particular decision taken by someone. Whether desistance from offending refers to the decision to stop offending or to a behavioral change implying the termination of offending is an important distinction at the core of much debate between criminologists. Indeed, someone may take the decision to change a particular bad habit, due to certain contingencies, will occasionally repeat this habit for a certain period of time before completely ending this habit. Some researchers have focused their attention to desistance of offending as the termination of offending and this line of work has now been referred to the study of desistance as an event. For others, desistance is a process that starts with the decision to stop offending, but this process can take some time and involve lapses and relapses until complete termination. Among scholars, the debates surrounding the conceptualization of desistance have been characterized by two distinct approaches: (a) those who describe desistance as an event (i.e., to cease offending altogether) and (b) those who define desistance as a process (i.e., a decision to stop offending until complete termination of the behavior) (Table 13.1).

### *Desistance from Crime as an Event*

According to several scholars, desistance is conceptualized as an event involving the relatively abrupt termination of offending. From this standpoint, therefore, desistance is relatively sudden. In the criminal career literature, for example, the term desistance has often been alluded to a burnout representing a key moment in someone life course (Soothill, Fitzpatrick, & Francis, 2013). In the field of correctional psychology, desistance from crime is typically perceived as an event where treatment and intervention play a key role. More specifically, correctional programming, case management, treatment programs and therapeutic interventions aiming to help offenders is built around the idea that desistance is an event.

**Table 13.1** Definitions of desistance from crime

Conceptualization	Description	Focus	Measure	Measuring issues
Desistance as an event	Desistance is sudden and abrupt	Identification of the factors/processes associated with the termination of offending	Absence of reoffending	Crime switching and intermittency of offending over time
Desistance as a process	Desistance is gradual and may involves a series of lapses and relapses	Understanding the transition from offending to non-offending	Deceleration of offending until termination	Access to repeated measurements of crime/delinquency over long time periods to capture the dynamic process

The goal is to help offenders stop their offending and participation in a treatment program is the event that can help achieve this goal. Yet it has not been evident that all or even most offenders terminate offending immediately following their last offense or much later. In that context, desistance from offending is conceptualized as a non-offending state and the maintenance of this state. Hence, reoffending, or an offending state, is considered to be the opposite of desistance.

The concept of desistance as an event or a state has raised several criticism stemming from research examining offending patterns over time. The first issue surrounding the conceptualization of desistance as an event is the versatility of offending which characterizes most individual criminal careers. Indeed, persistent offenders tend to be involved in several crime types. Therefore, when examining desistance as an event, researchers have raised concerns over the importance of crime-switching (e.g., Mulvey et al., 2004). Offending is dynamic and can take many forms and shape over time and across criminal careers. An individual involved in a series of burglaries may later be involved in drug-related offenses, while another involved in a series of auto theft may later be involved in a sexual offense. Hence, examining whether or not an individual has committed the same crime type or not over some follow-up time period is too limited and does not take into account what developmentalists refers to as the diversification process of offending (e.g., Le Blanc & Fréchette, 1989). Criminologists, therefore, usually consider a broad definition of reoffending (e.g., a new offense, a new arrest or conviction) to be able to show that termination is not just the result of crime switching.

The second issue related to the conceptualization of desistance as an event has to do with individual offending rates. More specifically, individuals involved in crime do not offend all the time, in fact they do not offend most of the time, making it difficult to pinpoint whether desistance has occurred or not. Sampson and Laub (2005) described individual offending patterns in terms of zigzag criminal careers. In other words, offending patterns are generally characterized by much intermittency which is counterintuitive to the idea of desistance as an abrupt cessation of offending (Piquero, Farrington, & Blumstein, 2003). The intermittency of offending, therefore, may lead to issues of false negative or the false identification of someone as a desister, when in fact, with a longer follow-up period, these individuals do reoffend (Bushway, Thornberry, & Krohn, 2003). As a result, researchers studying desistance as an event somewhat disagree as to how long a significant non-offending state needs to be to be indicative of desistance (e.g., 1, 3, 5, 10 years) (e.g., Shover & Thompson, 1992). Kazemian (2007) argued that desistance from crime unlikely occurs abruptly and that the sole emphasis on termination of offending may overlook important and valuable information on the criminal careers of offenders, particularly for chronic offenders.

There is a now a long tradition of research in the field of sexual violence and abuse about the sexual recidivism of individuals having been convicted for a sexual crime following their release. Studies have shown that the base rate of sexual reoffending is about 10 % for an average follow-up period of 5 years, the base rate increasing to about 20 % when followed for an average of 20 years (Hanson,

Morton, & Harris, 2003). Over the years, these studies have reported the base rate of sexual recidivism among various subgroups of individuals having been convicted for a sexual offense (adolescents, adults, males, females, etc.). These sexual recidivism studies present the same limitations as those observed in desistance research. More specifically, these studies only look at the offending behavior of the same individuals at two time points (e.g., from the prison release until the end of the follow-up period) and generally over a short follow-up period. It is not unusual, for example, to examine the proportion of offenders having sexually reoffended or not over a 4 or 5 year period. Hence, these sexual recidivism studies are also vulnerable to the issues of offending intermittency and crime switching. These studies have also shown that general recidivism rates are significantly higher than sexual recidivism rates suggesting that there is crime-switching among persistent offenders. In other words, individuals desisting from sexual offending might not entirely desist from crime. For example, a meta-analysis has shown that the general recidivism rate is about five times higher than the sexual recidivism rates among adolescent offenders (Caldwell, 2010). Similar results have been reported for adult offenders (e.g., Hanson & Bussière, 1998).

These findings for sexual recidivism have also shown that, with longer follow-ups, especially with adult offenders, the base rate of sexual recidivism increases (Hanson et al., 2003). This suggests that there is also the presence of offending intermittency among individuals having committed a sexual offense. For example, individuals who may have looked like they had desisted from sexual offending 3 years after being released from prison sexually reoffend a few years later (the case of false negative in risk assessment studies). This intermittency has to be interpreted in the context that the base rate of sexual recidivism are relatively low to begin with. While, from a policy standpoint, it is informative to determine the proportion of individuals being rearrested or reconvicted for a sexual offense within the first 4 or 5 years following their release, it only provides an aggregated snapshot of these individuals' entire offending patterns over life course. The presence or absence of sexual recidivism during some follow-up period may miss important aspects of individual offending pattern over life course (Lussier & Cale, 2013), such as whether offending is more or less serious over time, more or less frequent, as well as more or less specialized and patterned. In other words, these sexual recidivism studies are not well-suited to contextualize desistance for this population. Interestingly, while longitudinal studies overwhelmingly show that most individuals convicted for a sexual offense do not sexually reoffend during the follow-up period examined, the authors rarely speak of *desistance* for those offenders who did not sexually reoffend or did not reoffend at all.

### ***Desistance from Crime as a Process***

Whereas the above conceptualizations describe desistance as an abrupt termination of offending, developmental life course criminologists have emphasized desistance as a time-based process toward termination of offending (e.g., Le Blanc & Fréchette,

1989; Loeber & Le Blanc, 1990). This perspective aims to understand the transition from offending to non-offending, rather than non-offending itself. Bushway, Piquero, Broidy, Cauffman, and Mazerolle (2001), for example, defined desistance as the process of reduction in the rate of offending from a nonzero level to a stable rate empirically indistinguishable from zero. In fact, research has shown that  $\lambda$  (i.e., the rate of offending) tends to decrease with age (Piquero et al., 2003). While this specific formulation involves a near mathematical definition of desistance, the theoretical focus is the understanding and specification of risk and protective factors affecting the transition from offending to non-offending. This approach, for example, leads to the important question of whether there are biological, individual, social factors that can trigger the onset of desistance from crime. Indeed, for example, building human and social capital is not immediate, it takes time, and consequently, offending may, as a result, be characterized by intermittent periods of offending (e.g., Sampson & Laub, 2003). In effect, desistance is described as a process involving stages where gradual but not necessarily automatic or consistent reduction of offending occurs prior to the termination of offending. Reoffending lapses, therefore, are expected, but at a gradually and eventually lower rate until termination. When traditional measures of recidivism (e.g., having been arrested for a new offense) are used, persistent offenders and offenders in the process of desisting can be confounded into a single category: the recidivist.<sup>1</sup> Drawing from concepts in developmental psychology, Le Blanc and Fréchette (1989) were among the first to operationalize the various parameters indicative of desistance from offending using multiple offending indicators. According to this model, desistance is a process whereby offending stops progressing (i.e., involvement in less serious offenses), starts decelerating (i.e., offending rate is decreasing) and become more patterned and specialized (i.e., increase tendency to commit fewer different crime types) over time until complete termination of offending.

### *Comparing Desistance as an Event and a Process*

Empirical studies usually conceptualize desistance as an event or as a process but rarely both. Yet both conceptualizations considerably differ and this may lead to different classification of persisters and desisters depending on the operationalization chosen. This idea was first examined in the Bushway et al. (2003) study using self-reported data from the Rochester Youth Development Study on the development of general delinquent behavior among adolescents and young adults.

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<sup>1</sup> Conversely, intermittent offenders (i.e., active offenders), offenders in the process of desistance, and offenders having completely desisted can be confounded into another misleading category: the non-recidivists. In other words, individuals in a desistance phase may still be involved in crime and continue to have contact with the justice system.

The authors compared and contrasted two definition of desistance. First, to measure the event perspective, desisters were defined as those persons who offended at least once during adolescence but who had entered a non-offending state after turning 18 years old. Second, using sophisticated statistical modeling, the authors examined offending trajectories throughout the study period (from 13 to 22 years age) and identified seven distinct general offending trajectories. The event approach identified about 28 % of the sample as desister, whereas the process approach identified only 8 % of the sample as showing a clear desistance trend. The agreement between the two methods in terms of identifying the same individuals was just shy of 5 %. Similar findings were reported recently by Lussier, Corrado, and McCuish (2015) with a Canadian sample of incarcerated youth followed in early adulthood. Clearly, these two studies highlight that different definition may identify different individuals as desisters. Furthermore, these studies demonstrate that approaching desistance as a process may hold more promise as, not only it informs about termination of offending, it also informs about changes that leads to termination of offending.

## Desistance and the Dynamic Aspect of Offending Over Time

Several criminological theories of crime and delinquency generally recognize the importance of both between-individual and within-individual changes to explain longitudinal patterns of offending (e.g., Farrington, 2003; Moffitt, 1993). Desistance research has been typically based on a risk-factor approach that focuses on the identification of between-individual differences associated with desistance from crime. Emerging research on the desistance from sexual offending has also taken this perspective by highlighting possible and promising factors that could trigger desistance from sexual offending (e.g., Robbé et al., 2014). If researchers have gradually accepted the idea that desistance from crime is a process involving gradual changes over time, then the notion of *within-individual changes* should be central to understanding factors responsible for desistance. In spite of growing implementation of longitudinal studies with repeated measurements over time, the study of within-individual changes and desistance from crime has received very limited attention from scholars. These two approaches refers to what scholars describe as variable-oriented and person-oriented approaches (Bergman & Magnusson, 1997; Magnusson, 2003). The variable-oriented approach is concerned with differences between people and the identification of characteristics and processes that operate in a similar fashion for all members in a group. In contrast, the person-oriented approach is concerned with how a group of individuals may function differently than others under the same circumstances. In other words, the person-oriented approach stipulates that there is heterogeneity as to how a particular factor operates in relation to other individual characteristics. These two approaches with respect to the study of desistance from sexual offending are contrasted below.



## ***Variable-Oriented Approach and Between-Individual Differences***

The variable-oriented approach has been predominant in criminological research focused on the explanation of desistance from crime and has also been the traditional approach taken by researchers in the field of sexual violence and abuse to distinguish sexual recidivists from non-recidivists. From a variable-oriented viewpoint, researchers are concerned with the identification of factors associated with sexual recidivism with the assumption that individuals presenting this risk factors are all at increased risk of sexually reoffending (e.g., a prior conviction for a sexual offense). Traditionally, research has focused on relatively stable individual differences which can inform about long-term potential for sexual reoffending. These indicators have generally been identified through correlational-type statistical analyses designed to identify linear associations between two or more variables.<sup>2</sup> These empirical studies have combined offenders from different age-groups (i.e., early 20s, mid 40s, late 60s) at different life stages (e.g., young and single; married with children; retired and widow) but also at different stages of their criminal career (i.e., first-time offenders, recidivists, multirecidivists, desisters). From a variable-oriented perspective, aggregating individual characteristics from these persons is not an issue because individual characteristics such as age and criminal history are typically included in statistical analyses as covariates. From a variable-oriented perspective, the following assumptions are key: (a) the risk of reoffending is heterogeneous across offenders; (b) that heterogeneity can be captured by the accumulation (or not) of risk factors statistically related to recidivism; (c) the accumulation of risk factors is linearly related to the risk of reoffending; and (d) between-individual differences in offending are relatively stable over time.

Several qualitative and quantitative reviews have described and discussed the risk factors of sexual recidivism (e.g., Craig, Browne, Stringer, & Beech, 2005; Hanson & Bussière, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005; McCann & Lussier, 2008). These studies have highlighted the presence of multiple risk factors empirically associated with sexual recidivism. First, static risk factors are historical characteristics of individuals that cannot be changed through treatment or intervention. The most common static risk factors of sexual recidivism identified through actuarial studies refer to the offender's prior criminal history (e.g., number of prior convictions, prior conviction for a violent offense), prior sexual offending (e.g., prior sexual offense, prior noncontact sexual offense), victimology (e.g., male victim, prepubescent victim), and prior criminal justice intervention outcomes (e.g., treatment noncompletion, revocation of parole). Second, dynamic risk factors are

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<sup>2</sup>Typically, empirical studies having identified risk factors of sexual recidivism are based on only two time-points: (a) Time 1, measurement of the risk factors, only once, often at prison intake (sometimes just prior to parole hearings or prior to prison release); and (b) Time 2, measurement of sexual recidivism at follow-up.

relatively stable characteristics of the individual and are considered to be changeable through treatment/intervention (e.g., Craissati & Beech, 2003; Hanson & Harris, 2000, 2001). These risk factors are important for case management and treatment planning, given that changes to these risk factors might decrease the risk of reoffending. Dynamic risk factors tend to refer to the psychological functioning of the offender (e.g., sexual self-regulation, poor self-regulation), personality traits or disorders (e.g., antisocial personality disorder, psychopathy), deviant sexual arousal/preferences (e.g., pedophilia), and cognitive distortions or false beliefs supporting sex crimes (e.g., Beech & Ward, 2004). There has been some debate about the relative importance of both types of predictors (e.g., Dempster & Hart, 2002). At the center of this debate is the question of whether or not risk is dynamic and can change over time. If reoffending is associated with risk indicators that are *theoretically changeable* through treatment/intervention, then the risk of reoffending is susceptible to change. There has been limited research, however, testing the so-called dynamic aspect of these risk factors.

### ***Person-Oriented Approach and Within-Individual Changes***

Developmental psychologists proposed a person-oriented approach to describe a paradigm that shifts the focus from variables to individuals (Bergman & Magnusson, 1997). The person-oriented approach emphasizes the importance of studying the individual as a whole to better understand processes such as desistance from crime. From a person-oriented perspective, one cannot isolate social factors said to favor desistance such as marriage, work, or education from other individual characteristics such as strengths (e.g., social support, motivation to change, social skills, problem-solving skills) and difficulties (e.g., positive attitudes toward crime, affiliation with antisocial peers, impulsivity). Therefore, the person-oriented approach was proposed to address limitations of the variable-oriented perspective. The variable-oriented approach is based on aggregate data and average series across individuals which can misrepresents individual patterns of development (von Eye & Bogat, 2006). From a variable-oriented approach, for example, research has shown on several occasions that individuals with low attachment to social institutions (e.g., school, work, family) are more likely to persist offending. While these findings are certainly important, they do not inform about whether low social bonding is important in all or most persistent offenders, whether desistance can occur for those characterized by low bonding to social institutions, or about the longitudinal pattern of this association over time. Similarly, ongoing difficulties at work might create a context conducive to sexually violent behavior at home. Having been convicted for a sexual offense might also lead to problems findings a stable and fulfilling job. Only longitudinal data with repeated measurement can help disentangle these effects over time. Furthermore, while the impact between social factors and offending can be reciprocal, it can also change across developmental stage (e.g., adolescence, emerging adulthood, adulthood). Attachment to certain social institutions

might be more important at particular developmental stages. For example, school might be more important during adolescence while work might be more important during the adult-entry period. In sum, conclusions from variable-oriented studies might not apply to all or most individual cases and a person-oriented perspective can provide a complementary viewpoint to the process of desistance from crime.

To better account for the heterogeneity of individual development, the person-oriented approach focuses on the disaggregation of information and the identification of individual longitudinal patterns, with the understanding that some patterns occur more often than others (Magnusson, 2003). In that regard, development can be conceptualized as a process characterized by states that can change over time (Bergman & Magnusson, 1997) not unlike the process of desistance from crime. Therefore, repeated measurements become pivotal to the identification of continuity and change and fluctuate as individual age. As such, this perspective needs to account for the diversity of onset and developmental course of the behavior. To this end, nonlinear modeling becomes crucial to detect trends in individual development over time.

Lussier (2015) proposed a developmental process model of sexual offending to help describe and identify developmental patterns of sexual offending. The developmental model recognizes the presence of three developmental stages (a) activation of sexual offending, or the onset and the process by which the age of onset of leads to repetitive, diverse and persistent sexual offending; (b) escalation of sexual offending or the process by which sexual offending becomes chronic and escalate to more serious sexual offenses; and (c) desistance or the process by which offending becomes more patterned and infrequent until complete termination. Each developmental stage also recognizes the presence of heterogeneity by suggesting that some processes are more prevalent than others. For example, this model suggests that most patterns of sexual offending are initiated late (in emerging adulthood/adulthood), that escalation is minimal and desistance from sexual offending is near immediate. At the opposite, it is suggested that there are some instances where sexual offending starts early, escalate to more serious sexual offenses and where desistance is slow and gradual. According to this model, therefore, desistance from sexual offending includes a range of processes that vary from desistance being near immediate to another whereby desistance is slow and gradual over a long-time period. This person-oriented approach, therefore, recognizes the presence of certain developmental patterns, with the understanding that some patterns are more prevalent than others. Hence, configurations of variables, longitudinal data with repeated measurements, nonlinear patterns of continuity, and changes over time best characterizes the person-oriented approach. This is not to say that the person-oriented approach is superior to the variable-oriented approach, but that it provides a different perspective on human development (Bergman & Trost, 2006). This perspective is in sharp contrast to most sexual recidivism studies which only looks at individuals at two time point across the life-course, irrespective of the life stages and the offending stage individuals are at. Sexual recidivism studies have been exclusively based on a variable-oriented approach, and as a result, are not designed to inform about within-individual changes and underlying processes responsible for desistance among all individuals convicted for a sexual offense.

## *Offending Trajectories and Desistance from Crime*

In order to account for the heterogeneity of longitudinal pattern of development and the dynamic aspect of offending over time, researchers theorized that desistance patterns are an integral part of offending trajectories (e.g., Le Blanc & Fréchette, 1989; Moffitt, 1993). Offending trajectories consist of patterns delineating onset, course, and termination of offending over time. This perspective asserts that there are relatively few but rather specific and predictable longitudinal patterns of offending. From a trajectory perspective, desistance from crime is hypothesized to be intrinsically linked to both the age of onset of offending and the course of offending. There is a consensus that age of onset of offending is statistically related to longer criminal careers (e.g., Blumstein et al., 1986; Farrington, 2003; Loeber & Le Blanc, 1990). Hence, researchers have formulated hypotheses regarding desistance from crime based on the age of onset of offending distinguishing early and late starters, with an emphasis on the adolescence–adulthood transition (e.g., Moffitt, 1993). Researchers generally recognize the presence of an early-onset, persistent patterns of general delinquency (also known as life-course persisters) who tend to escalate to the most serious forms of crime and delinquency, such as violent and sexual offenses (Moffitt, 1993; Le Blanc & Fréchette, 1989). Researchers have theorized that late-onset, also known as adolescence-onset offending, is more likely to be associated with a pattern of desistance prior to or immediately during the initial adult transition period than early, childhood-onset of offending. The explanation rests on developmental perspective assertions that late entry into delinquency more typically involves youth who have benefited from prosocial influences and learned the necessary prosocial skills to adjust to the adolescence–adulthood transition prior their delinquency involvement (e.g., Moffitt, 1993). To measure and identify such patterns, advanced statistical techniques have been developed such as group-based modeling (Nagin, 2005) or latent-growth curve modeling (e.g., Duncan & Duncan, 2004) have been utilized by researchers to identify trajectories and patterns of desistance from crime. Very importantly, longitudinal studies conducted by at-risk samples have shown that the adolescent-limited pattern of offending with desistance prior to age 18 is not as common as first believed. For example, the Bushway et al. (2003) study found that a trajectory described as “bell-shape desistors,” an offending pattern that resembled the classic age–crime curve where offending is limited and circumscribed to the period of adolescence, comprised only 8.5 % of the sample of at-risk youth. More specifically, for most youth included in this sample, desistance from offending occurred after age 18. The adolescent-limited desistance type has questionable explanatory relevance regarding desistance patterns of more serious patterns of offending, such as chronic, violent and sexual offending.

## *Offending Trajectories of Individuals Involved in Sexual Offense*

The interest for offending trajectories and patterns of desistance among individual having committed a sexual offense has grown in recent years. Researchers have examined general offending among samples of adult offenders (Francis, Harris, Wallace,

Soothill, & Knight, 2014; Lussier, Tzoumakis, Cale, & Amirault, 2010) as well as juvenile offenders (Cale, Smallbone, Rayment-McHugh, & Dowling, 2015; Lussier et al., 2012; McCuish et al., 2015). Researchers have focused on the identification of general offending as opposed to sexual offending trajectories because individuals involved in sexual offenses are first and foremost involved in nonsexual offenses. Focusing on general offending has also the advantage of taking into account and examining the entire criminal activity simultaneously, therefore addressing the above-mentioned issues of intermittency of offending as well as crime-switching.

These longitudinal studies highlighted the presence of distinct general offending trajectories among individuals having been committed a sexual offense (e.g., Francis et al., 2013; Lussier et al., 2010; Lussier et al., 2012). Such research highlight that there not one but multiple offending trajectories among individuals involved in sexual offenses. More specifically, research has found empirical evidence for the presence of the following patterns: (a) a high-rate chronic offending trajectory who mirrors the life-course persistent pattern of offending theorized by Moffitt (1993) and characterizes individuals whose offending is characterized by an early-onset, a high volume of very diverse offenses, continuity in adulthood and gradual slowing down of offending in adulthood; (b) a low-chronic offending trajectory, which characterizes an offending pattern that starts relatively early, which persist over time and continues into adulthood, but offending is not as diverse not as important as the high-rate chronics; (c) a low rate offending trajectory, whose offending is intermittent and occasional if not somewhat limited to sexual offenses; (d) an adolescence-limited offending trajectory where offending is relatively circumscribed to the period of adolescence. Each of the patterns that have been found thus far with samples of individuals involved in sexual offenses mirrors those found with general samples of at-risk youth. These offending trajectories are relatively distinct in terms of the age of onset, the peak of offending, and the rate (and change of rate) of offending across the study period.

Furthermore, these study findings highlight the fact that there are distinct desistance patterns among this population. In fact, the typical age–crime curve (Farrington, 1986) does not represent well the diversity longitudinal offending patterns identified among adolescent and adult offenders. Of the identified general offending patterns found, the findings reiterate the importance of adolescence–adulthood transition has a turning point favoring desistance from crime. For some, desistance appears to start in middle/late adolescence, while for others, such as chronic offenders, the process of desistance occurs around the transition into adulthood (McCuish et al., 2015; Lussier, Corrado & McCuish, 2015). Also, for chronic offenders, the transition to adulthood can involve the initiation of a deceleration process that, in itself, may not be sufficient to both decrease the probabilities of reoffending and create conditions necessary for the maintenance of a non-offending state. In other words, the mechanisms responsible for desistance during the adolescence–adulthood transition may not be sufficient to terminate offending for some individuals. For most individuals, the onset of desistance from general offending is highlighted by a decelerating pattern in the rate of offending. The process of deceleration, though, may be either relatively short and prompt, more gradual over a portion of adolescence or very slow. For others, however, the adolescence–adulthood transition may have a limited impact on deceleration, and consequently has no

impact or a limited impact on decreasing the probabilities of reoffending. This group of individuals, characterized by an increase of offending after the adolescence–adulthood transition, not well documented in the criminological literature, may not benefit from the same turning points that others benefit from (Lussier, Corrado & McCuish, 2015).

There has been even more limited theoretical and empirical research on the sexual offending trajectories of adolescent and adult offenders (Lussier et al., 2012; Lussier & Davies, 2011; Tewksbury & Jennings, 2010). The scientific literature suggests the presence of much discontinuity, albeit some continuity, in sexual offending over time (e.g., Lussier & Blokland, 2014). Discussing specifically the presence of sexual offending trajectories among youth, Becker (1998) suggested the presence of three groups: (a) an abstainer group (i.e., nonrecidivist) who do not sexually reoffend; (b) an antisocial group whose sexual offense is part of a general tendency to engage in crime and delinquency), and (c) a sexual group who is more at risk of persistence in sexual offense. The model is clinically intuitive but has not been empirically tested. It does suggest, however, that the sexual group will never desist from sexual offending, which is not supported by the empirical literature. This hypothesis also implicitly states that the antisocial group is not at risk of sexually reoffending, which is counterintuitive with the fact that adolescents whose sexual offending persists in adulthood are more involved in nonsexual offending than those who do not persist (Lussier & Blokland, 2014; Zimring, Piquero, & Jennings, 2007). Furthermore, Becker's (1998) focus on recidivism informs neither about other developmental aspects of offending such as desistance nor about offending trajectories. With the advent of longitudinal studies and the emergence of statistical techniques allowing the modeling of longitudinal patterns of development, researchers have been able to examine and uncover the presence of sexual offending trajectories. The current state of theoretical and empirical knowledge highlights the presence of at least three distinct sexual offending trajectories: (a) the adolescent-limited, (b) the high-rate/slow-desisters, and (c) the adult-onset (e.g., Lussier, 2015; Lussier et al., 2012). It is hypothesized that these trajectories can be distinguished on a series of developmental indicators.

### **Adolescence-Limited Sexual Offending**

The adolescent-limited group are hypothesized to represent the vast majority of adolescents involved in sexual offenses. Their prevalence, however, might not be as important in clinical settings or in the juvenile justice system. This group may share some similarities with the young male syndrome described by Lalumière, Harris, Quinsey, and Rice (2005). This group is unlikely to show sexual behavior problems during childhood and is hypothesized to be characterized by a relatively normal sexual development up to puberty. Their offending is suggested to start between the period of early and mid-adolescence. It is also argued that the growth of their sexual offending will be very limited given that these young persons may offend only once although some of them may repeat their behavior. Persistence, therefore, is possible if the associated risk factors are present and the protective factors are limited. In the context where there is persistence of sexual offending over time, it is argued that the

sexual offending behavior will tend to be of the same nature. It is believed that, for this group, the risk factors for sexual offending are transitory and more specific to the period of adolescence (e.g., puberty, peer influence, binge drinking, delinquency involvement, sexual arousal, opportunity). It is also hypothesized that sexual offending may take various shapes (e.g., child abuse, peer abuse) because situational, contextual, and social factors will be pivotal in creating opportunities for illegal sexual behaviors. It is therefore argued that their offending will neither be reflective of overwhelming deviant sexual thoughts, fantasies, or urges, nor of a deviant sexual preference in the making. However, these individuals may show a pattern of non-sexual juvenile delinquency.

The study by Lussier et al. (2012) has shown that desistance from sexual offending is rapid, if not immediate, for most of them and occur in either late adolescence or in emerging adulthood. This pattern was found for those having offending against peers, children or in group. If there is persistence of offending beyond that period, it is expected that offending will be nonsexual in nature. Indeed, emerging research has shown that this group may persist offending in adulthood, but such offending is predominantly nonsexual in nature (Lussier et al., 2012). Indeed, a subgroup of youth involved in adolescence-limited sexual offending, persist their criminal activities in adulthood but such activities are nonsexual in nature. This finding is unclear and may be the result of different processes. It could be hypothesized that sexual offending and the societal response to it may create a general pattern of marginalization through a labeling effect with long-lasting effects. It could also be that juvenile sexual offending was simply opportunistic and part of a general proclivity toward delinquency in general (the antisocial youth as suggested by Becker, 1998). In both cases, focusing intervention solely on sexual offending and desistance from sexual offending would be inappropriate. This group is most likely to be found in community-based samples and therefore reflects trends and observations found in community-based studies. Currently, given the absence of a developmental model to guide clinical assessment and the similarities in terms of offending during adolescence, these adolescents may be misclassified as high-rate/slow-desisters.

### **High-Rate Slow Desisters**

The second sexual offending trajectory found has been described as the high-rate/slow-desisters and they represent a small subgroup of adolescents having committed a sexual offense (Lussier, 2015). This group was initially found by Lussier et al. (2012) in a group of juvenile offenders followed over a twenty-year period. A very similar pattern, referred to as a high-rate limited trajectory found by Francis et al. (2013) with a sample of adult offenders, consists of juvenile-onset offenders who persist in adulthood but their sexual offending gradually decrease until what appears to be termination in their late-30s. The high-rate/slow-desisters are most likely to be found in clinical samples and therefore reflect trends and observations found in clinical studies. This group is unlikely to be found in self-reported, population-based community samples given the overall low prevalence of this developmental pattern. This pattern, however, is more prevalent in criminal justice settings,

especially those handling more serious cases and juvenile sexual recidivists (i.e., detention, inpatient treatment programs). It is hypothesized that their onset of sexual offending occurs in childhood, as manifested by the onset of atypical sexual behaviors during childhood, which may precede or co-occur with their sexual offending (Lussier, 2015). This is not suggesting that all children showing atypical sexual behaviors go on to become juvenile sexual offenders, but rather that the atypical sexual behaviors of this group in particular persist beyond childhood due to the presence of other risk factors working in combination with an early onset of atypical sexual behaviors. In other words, this group is at risk of sexual offending during adolescence, especially if the exposure to risk factors of sexual offending persists and continues to overcome the protective factors. The growth of their sexual offending will be gradual and constant without any intervention.

This group is more likely to persist in their sexual offending beyond the period of adolescence. It is argued that these juveniles will eventually desist from sexual offending, but the desistance process is significantly longer due to the long-lasting effect of the multiple risk factors to which they have been exposed to early (Lussier, 2015). They are more likely to be characterized with developmental risk factors related to sexual offending (e.g., childhood sexual victimization, exposure to sexually deviant models). There is little empirical studies examining the factors associated specifically with the persistence or desistance from sexual offending for this particular group. It has been hypothesized that persistence of their sexual offending is reflective of the presence and the role of more stable risk factors and individual differences conducive to the commission of sexual offenses. Lussier et al. (2012) hypothesized that the high-rate/slow-desister group is also the one most likely to show evidence of diversification of sexual offending, which is most likely to occur during adolescence and young adulthood, as well as progressive evidence of specialization in sexual offenses over time until termination of sexual offending.

### **Adult-Onset Sexual Offending**

The term adult-onset sexual offending has been rarely used in the scientific literature given the long held view that sexual deviance starts during childhood or adolescence (for example, see Abel, Osborn, & Twigg, 1993). Longitudinal research, however, does not support the view that all or that most adults involved in sexual offenses were juvenile-onset offenders (for a review, Lussier & Cale, 2013). The lack of longitudinal research on offending trajectories limits conclusions that can be drawn about the adult-onset sexual offending group. Therefore, it remains unclear whether there is one or multiple adult-onset sexual offending trajectories but emerging evidence seems to point to the latter scenario. Prospective longitudinal research with community-based sample has shown that adult-onset sexual offending is sometime part of an escalation process of crime and delinquency. More precisely, youth involved in chronic offending, with no evidence of involvement in sexual offending during adolescence, who failed to desist from crime around the adolescence–adulthood transition escalate their offending behavior to sexual crime in early adulthood (e.g., Lussier & Blokland, 2014; Zimring et al., 2007). The combined observations



that these individuals' offending behavior is still progressing an escalating in adulthood combined with the inability to take advantage of turning points when transitioning in adulthood suggests that this group and the underlying processes for the unfolding of this pattern are different from the adolescent-onset groups. In fact, adult-onset sexual offending is unlikely to be characterized by the same developmental background as the adolescence-onset offenders and emerging research provides preliminary evidence of distinct childhood risk factors for adolescence-onset versus adult-onset sexual offending (Lussier, Blokland, Mathesius, Pardini, & Loeber, 2015). Furthermore, using retrospective data, Knight, Ronis, and Zakireh (2009) reported that adult as opposed to juvenile sexual offending tend to be more strongly associated with evidence of experiences of verbal and sexual abuse during childhood. The examination of longitudinal patterns of sexual offending among adult-onset offenders is particularly important, therefore, as it can uncover additional pathways of desistance specific to this group.

In a study conducted by Francis et al. (2013), three adult-onset sexual offending trajectories were identified in a sample of offenders in a mental health institution. The first trajectory, the late-onset accelerators (about 8 % of the sample), refers to a longitudinal pattern where sexual offending emerges in the 40s with no evidence of desistance thereafter. The two other groups, the high-rate accelerators (12 % of the sample) and the low rate persistent (56 %) show similar longitudinal pattern where the former group sexually offended at a higher rate than the latter. For both groups, sexual offending rapidly peaked in adulthood and show a downward trend thereafter, especially when these individuals were in their 40s. Similar patterns were reported by Lussier and Davies (2011) with a sample of convicted adult offenders. Clearly, the desistance patterns found in the Francis et al. (2014) study suggests the presence of additional desistance patterns when looking more specifically among a group of adult offenders to those observed for adolescent offenders. It is unlikely the context and factors responsible for the desistance process identified for the adolescent-limited pattern are also responsible the desistance among the high-rate slow desisters (or high-rate limited in the Francis et al., 2013 study) and the late-onset accelerators.

In all, if these preliminary findings highlight the presence of some heterogeneity in sexual offending trajectories and desistance patterns, additional research is needed to unveil the whole spectrum of theoretically and clinically relevant sexual offending trajectories across developmental periods. If this line of research is very promising, more research is also needed to identify the factors responsible for desistance from sexual offending and determine whether these factors are specific to sexual offending and this population.

## **Explanatory Models of Desistance**

Several explanations of desistance from offending have been proposed over the years (for reviews, Cusson, 2008; Kazemian, 2014; Laub & Sampson, 2001; Maruna, 2001; Soothill et al., 2013). These explanations and hypotheses have focused on the impact of age and aging, life transitions and developmental stages,

the role of social factors, life events and turning points, as well as the impact of formal and informal sanctions (e.g., threats, victimization, arrest, incarceration). It is possible to organize the current state of knowledge around three dimensions (Table 13.2): (a) individual characteristics and the role of internal changes; (b) external factors, pressure and contingencies; and (c) developmental life course perspective. The first dimension emphasizes the person and individual characteristics as key factors promoting desistance. The second dimension puts more emphasis on the role and importance of the social environment to explain the mechanisms of desistance from crime. The final dimension emphasizes the role and importance of person–environment interactions and the sociodevelopmental context in which such interactions take place. These three dimensions and associated issues are presented below.

### *Individual Characteristics and Internal Changes*

#### **Maturation and Aging Out of Crime**

The maturation hypothesis is probably one of the first and most widely held view about the causal mechanisms of desistance from crime and delinquency. This hypothesis was initially proposed following observations about the age–crime curve, that is, while delinquency involvement peaks during mid-adolescence, it gradually drops with age, especially past the adolescence–adulthood transition (Glueck & Glueck, 1940). The maturational hypothesis is based broadly on the idea that adolescents typically becoming more emotionally stable, interpersonally more sophisticated and skilled, and intellectually more knowledgeable and more future-oriented with age. These changes, in turn, increases moral reasoning, reduce impulsivity and facilitate more future-oriented goals and planning. Were probably among the first to examine offending as part of a longitudinal cohort study of a large sample of juvenile delinquents. They noticed that participation in crime dropped as youth reach their 20s and 30s and suggested that this age effect was the result of a maturation effect. They argued that, desistance occurs naturally with age and aging, as a result of physical, moral, intellectual and mental changes characterizing a maturation process. This process was the result of a changing environment but reflected internal changes whereby youth became less impulsive, more future-oriented. As a result of this maturation process, crime became less attractive and acceptable. They also argued that this maturation effect was part of a normal process of aging unless youth had been exposed to severe neuropsychological or environmental problems. The maturational hypothesis has regain attention in recent years with emerging research from the field of neuroscience. Research has convincingly shown that the adolescent’s brain is different than the child and the adult’s brain and part of a natural brain developmental process than influence the person’s ability to regulate cognitions, emotions and behavior (Steinberg, 2010). Relatedly, longitudinal research has been able to identify patterns of development with respect to personality characteristics, impulse control, and future-oriented perspective that mirrors that are associated with desistance from offending (e.g., Monahan, Steinberg, Cauffman, &

**Table 13.2** Summary of probable explanatory mechanisms of desistance from crime

Focus	Processes and mechanism responsible for desistance	Description	Key factor
1. Individual factors, characteristics and internal changes	(a) Biological impact of aging	The biological consequences of aging on the organism, which in turn impacts participation in a lifestyle conducive to crime	Aging
	(b) Maturation	Age and aging has an indirect impact on offending as a result of biological, emotional, behavioral, social, and moral development associated with age	Brain maturation
	(c) Identity construction and scripts	To desist from crime, individuals need to develop a coherent and prosocial identity for themselves	Self-identity change
2. External factors, pressure and contingencies	(a) Deterrence	Desistance is the result of a particular decision-making process whereby the individual come to the conclusion that the costs of crime outweighs its benefits	Cumulative negative impact of crime participation
	(b) Offending opportunities	With age and aging, interesting and profitable offending opportunities become rare and less attractive. Offenders not adapting to the changing opportunity structure may chose to desist from crime	Limited access to profitable and interesting criminal opportunities
	(c) Social learning	Changing patterns of peer relations and influence participation in crime and delinquency	Cutting ties with negative social influences and developing ties with positive ones
3. Developmental life course	(a) Developmental	Desistance/persistence are bounded to particular developmental experiences and developmental trajectories	Overcoming exposure to early life adversities and the consequences of delinquency participation
	(b) Life events, life transitions, and turning points	Entry into certain social roles such as work, marriage and the military can help knit-off the past, increase informal social controls and promote self-identity changes	Timely access to certain conventional social roles

Mulvey, 2009). In fact, research has shown that there are distinct patterns of personality development that are associated with distinct offending patterns over life course (Morizot & Le Blanc, 2005).

### **The Inexorable Age Effect**

The age–crime curve and the aging out effect were interpreted differently by Hirschi and Gottfredson (1983). They argued that the (a) age–crime curve is invariant across individuals; (b) that the age–crime association is robust across time, place, and social condition; (c) that age has a direct effect on crime, and (d) that conceptualization of the age effect is largely redundant. Hence, unlike the Gluecks and their maturational hypothesis, Hirschi and Gottfredson argued that age has a direct effect on crime and desistance. They later added that, while the propensity to commit crime remains relatively stable throughout life course, offending declines with age due to the inexorable aging of the organism (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). In other words, the desistance from crime is the result of a biological process that need not to be explained further. From this standpoint, aging affects offending participation the same way it affects cognitive performance and memory, performance in sports, scholarly productivity, and other age-dependent behaviors. Hence, they asserted that life events and transitions such as education, employment and marriage have no or little impact on desistance. These assertions, however, have been criticized on various grounds. Farrington (1986), for example, presented data suggesting that the peak of offending in middle adolescence followed by a rapid drop off from middle adolescence to early adulthood was a product of modern society and the emergence of a new developmental stage, that is, adolescence. Greenberg (1985) and Moffitt (1993) also proposed alternative explanations of the age–crime curve. Of importance, Moffitt (1993) as well as Blumstein, Cohen, and Farrington (1988) argued that the age-effect was not invariant across individuals. According to this view, a subgroup of individuals, chronic offenders, did not experience the same drop in offending rate in adulthood as other did. As a result, some suggested that the maturation effect did not appear to be as prevalent among chronic, serious and violent offenders as it appears to be in the general population of juvenile offenders (e.g., Tolan & Gorman-Smith, 1998). Maruna (2001), however, argued that the age-effect is somewhat overstated considering that it is more pronounced for official (e.g., arrest) than self-reported measures of offending. With age, Maruna hypothesized that individuals become more adept at not being caught or they slow down their criminal activity to a level at which they rarely get apprehended and/or they switch to less risky offenses, such as white-collar crimes. If they do get caught, they spend more time incarcerated

### **Cognitive Changes and Self-Identity Transformation**

Another line of research proposes that within-individual subjective changes are key to the process of desistance from crime and delinquency. In this oft-cited study, Shover and Thompson (1992) reported observations collected from a sample of

prison inmates, that the probability of desistance from crime increases as expectations for achieving friendship, money, autonomy and happiness via crime decreased. Changes in perceptions such as those noted by Shover and Thompson (1992) has lead researchers to focus more on describing subjective changes through the study of narratives from individuals with a sustained pattern of offending. Maruna (2001), for example, identified distinct cognitive schema or scripts in individuals described as persisters and those described as desisters. Desisters, as opposed to persisters, were characterized by a more positive and optimistic outlook on life. These individuals reported having a certain control over their destiny as opposed to being pessimistic and powerless. Desisters were more likely to describe themselves as decent people wanting to make good. Persisters, on the other hand, felt powerless toward their involvement criminal activities in spite of reporting feeling tired of this lifestyle and their social status. These individuals felt incapable of changing their lifestyle mainly because of their drug/alcohol dependence, their limited of education and professional skills necessary to find a decent job, as well as feeling prejudiced because of their criminal history. This approach stresses the role and importance of significant, dramatic life events (e.g., a friend being killed, a serious accident). Such events may lead to the cognitive transformation of the self or an identity change necessary for desistance to occur, giving these individuals an opportunity to redefine themselves as decent individuals (e.g., Maruna, 2001). Interestingly, the conditions that can trigger the decision to desist from crime are quite similar to those conducive to a reoffense (Zamble & Quinsey, 1997), which may reinforce the idea that the individual's interpretation of these negative events in a given context, more specifically life stages and stages of offending, is more important than these negative life event themselves. Maruna (2001) argues maturation occurs independently of age and leads to subjective self-identity changes essential for desistance from crime to occur.

Similarly, Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph (2002) examined desistance and persistence patterns among a sample of male and female adolescents involved in serious delinquency. Contrary to social control perspective model of desistance (e.g., Laub & Sampson, 2009), their study findings showed that neither marital attachment nor job stability was a significant factor of desistance from offending. As a result, these researchers proposed an alternative explanation using a symbolic interactionist perspective. This model is said to account for (a) the initial attempts to desistance from crime before the person had much chance to accumulate the necessary human and social capital (b) the observations that individuals exposed to opportunities to take advantage of prosocial experience and conventional social roles (e.g., work, marriage) fail to take advantage of them, and (c) subjective, cognitive changes that occur during the desistance phase. According to Giordano et al. (2002), desistance is a transformation process whereby *cognitive shifts* play an integral part. The authors distinguished different cognitive shifts playing an integral part in desistance from crime. The first cognitive shift involves changes in the individual's basic openness and readiness to change. While this openness to change is necessary, it is often not sufficient for desistance to occur. Next, exposure to what the authors refers to a "hooks for change" (i.e., prosocial experiences) as well as a positive attitude toward them are key to promoting transformation. These hooks for change, similar to the concept of turning points (Sampson & Laub, 2003), provide

opportunities and reinforcements for a self-identity change. The third cognitive shift characterizing the process of desistance is the individual's ability to identify change and redefine their self, in line with Maruna (2001). Fourth, the authors recognize the role and importance of a shift as to how individuals view crime and delinquency as well as the associated lifestyle itself. The focus of this perspective is on individual–environment interactions, in particular, the ability to change including openness for change as well as the environment providing prochange conditions. Laub and Sampson (2009), in particular have been critical of the importance of such cognitive transformation and identity shifts, as they argue that individuals do desist from crime without making a conscious decision to make good, as Maruna (2001) suggested.

## *External Factors, Pressure and Contingencies*

### **Rational-Choice Theory and Deterrence**

Another set of hypotheses emphasizes the deterrent role and importance of negative formal and informal consequences of crime and delinquency. From this standpoint, desistance from crime is the result of a conscious and rational decision made by an individual. According to this perspective, when the negative consequences outweigh the positive and pleasurable aspects of crime, desistance is more likely to occur. A long held view of desistance as a rational-choice desistance involves an underlying process suggesting that with successive arrests, offenders become more known to the police and criminal justice system officials. This familiarity then results in the increased probability of subsequently of not only being arrested but also receiving more punitive legal sanctions. The increased punitive probabilities is said to deter offender from future criminal involvement. This idea is counterintuitive to the observations that recidivism rates increase over successive arrests (e.g., Wolfgang, Figlio, & Sellin, 1972).

Alternative explanations have been proposed from the study of offender's narratives. Cusson and Pinsonneault (1986) conducted a series of interviews with ex-robbers to determine the context under which these individuals took the decision to give up crime. The ex-robbers reported that their decision was triggered either by a shocking event often occurring during the commission of a crime (e.g., shootout with the police, co-offender killed) or some delayed deterrence effect. Additionally, Shover and Thompson (1992) examined the linked between past criminal success and desistance from offending. The researchers concluded that individuals who managed to escaped detection and apprehension the most were less likely to desist from crime. They added that detection avoidance may promote persistence into crime as it falsely gives individuals a certain illusion that he or she possesses particular skills allowing to avoid detection and get away with it while creating an impression of uncertainty and low risk of detection and sanctions. Cusson (2008) later concluded that desistance was a consequence of formal and informal sanctions

resulting from an antisocial lifestyle. He added that three key sanction types typically weigh on the offender's decision to give up crime: (a) increased fear of victims and being victimized on their next offense; (b) fear of apprehension and incarceration; and (c) increased fear of death. In effect, others have argued that the deterrence effect is more of a process by which the negative consequences of crime and the associated lifestyle cumulated over time to a point where they surpass their positive aspects. Cusson (2008), for example, spoke of a delayed deterrent effect of the cumulative impact of formal (e.g., arrest, incarceration) and informal sanctions (e.g., victimization) as well as the negative consequences of the criminal lifestyle (e.g., injuries, fatigue). As a result, the negative consequences of further involvement in crime outweigh the positive or pleasurable aspects of continued offending that moderate the drive to commit a crime.

### **Opportunity Structure of Crime**

Tremblay (1999), on the other hand, argued that desistance from offending could be explained, at least in part by the contingencies characterizing criminal opportunities. According to this hypothesis, with age, individuals gradually desist from crime as a result of the most attractive and profitable criminal opportunities being difficult to access. Therefore, individuals are eventually confronted by the reality that criminal involvement has little payoffs compared to the negative consequences that can result from criminal participation. As Shover and Thomson (1992; p. 91) note, "... growing disenchantment with the criminal life also causes offenders to lower their expectations for achieving success via criminal means." Confronted by the realization of poor prospects resulting from not so profitable offenses, offenders face the dilemma of either opting out of crime or trying to maximize their gain through strategic decisions involving, among others things, selective association and alliance with co-offenders and organized crime (Tremblay, 1999). Similarly, Piliavin, Gartner, Thornton, and Matsueda (1986) reported from their study that the effect of age on persistence in crime was mediated by the individual's belief that expected earnings from crime were greater or equal to expected earnings from a legitimate job. The offender's perception of legal risk has not been shown to be consistently related to the decision to desist from crime. In fact, research suggests that contacts with the criminal justice system may actually lower offenders' perceptions of being caught and convicted for their crime in the future (e.g., Corrado, Cohen, Glackman, & Odgers, 2003; Pogarsky & Piquero, 2003). While this research may suggest the need for a more punitive approach to crime and delinquency, others have raised concerns over such conclusions. For example, Laub and Sampson (2001; p.57) coined the term cumulative continuity to refer a process whereby delinquency involvement mortgages the person's future by *generating negative consequences for the life chances of stigmatized and institutionalized youth*. They argue that arrest and incarceration may in weaken social bonds, spark failure at school/work, cut these individuals off from the most promising life avenues and in turn increase adult crime.

## Peer Influence

While criminologists have long recognized the role and importance of peer influence in delinquent activities (e.g., Sutherland, 1947), its interpretation differs across school of thoughts. Control theorists generally argue that peer delinquency is a consequence of individuals seeking the company of others with similar background, interests, lifestyle, and routine activities. In other words, the presence of negative social influences is a consequence rather than a cause of delinquency (e.g., Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). This is reinforced by the idea that, especially in adolescence, delinquency is a group-phenomenon where co-offending is common (e.g., Farrington, 2003). Social learning theorists, however, argue that delinquency is learned from others through the acquisition of attitudes supportive to crime and delinquency (Sutherland, 1947) or imitation and reinforcement (Akers & Cochran, 1985), while others argue that the peer-delinquency association is bidirectional (Thornberry et al., 1994)—i.e., association with delinquent peers increase delinquency involvement through reinforcement provided by members of the peer network, while delinquency involvement favor further development of delinquent peer association. Warr (1993) has examined the role of peer influence in the context of desistance from offending. He reported that the amount of time spend with friends, exposure to them and their influence as well as their commitment of friends follows the age-crime curve, that is, it peaks during adolescence at a time where delinquency involvement is most important and it typically drops thereafter. Warr (1998) argued that crucial to desistance from crime are changing patterns of peers relations over life course and significant life transitions may favor such changes. Of importance, marriage appears to discourage crime and delinquency by weakening former criminal associations. Warr's analyses of the National Youth Survey data, a national probability sample of teens including a follow-up until age 24, revealed that time spent with friends changed following marriage and not before, suggesting that these individuals chose to settle not as a result of fractured peer relationships. These findings are intriguing but should be interpreted cautiously as these were observed with samples drawn from the general population which do not necessarily generalize to samples including chronic, violent and sexual offenders. With a highly delinquent sample, Giordano et al. (2003) has shown that while marriage can serve to reduce contact with negative peer influence, it is not inevitable. They stressed that without a strong motivation to change and commitment to the idea of developing a more respectable identity, the person may simply ignore the partner's efforts or even break the relationship altogether.

## *Developmental, Life Course Explanations*

### **Life Course, Turning Points, and Access to Adult Roles**

Life course researchers have stressed the role of social factors and local circumstances to explain human development. Elder (1998), for example, argues that developmental trajectories are altered by social circumstances. This author emphasized the importance of approaching human lives from a dynamic perspective in that



human development is not limited to the period of childhood but applies to the life span. More specifically, human lives should be conceived as a succession of life transitions and social roles (e.g., school entry, entry into the labor force, marriage, parenthood). The developmental impact of this succession of life transitions is contingent on when they occur in a person's life. This age-graded perspective of life transitions and social roles proposed by Elder (1998) suggests that a specific life transition occurring too early (e.g., teen pregnancy, high school dropout) or too late can produce a cumulating effects of life disadvantages, such as economic deprivation and loss of education. This social perspective was later applied by criminologists to explain longitudinal patterns of crime and delinquency by focusing on the transition to adulthood and access to adult roles that diminish the acceptability and efficacy of delinquent behaviors. According to Laub and Sampson (2009), when employed, married or in military service, individuals are less likely to commit crimes. Marriage, parenthood, military service, and work are key examples of essential turning points that typically constitute powerful informal social controls that can impact routine activities, criminal opportunities and reduce offender's decisions to continue offending into adulthood (e.g., Laub & Sampson, 2009; Sampson & Laub, 2005). From this perspective, though, it is not solely the presence of these life events and turning points, but their quality and stability involving strong prosocial ties in different contexts (e.g., at home, at work) with prosocial peers that disapprove of deviant behaviors while promoting prosocial ones that influence desistance (e.g., Kazemian & Maruna, 2009). Prospective longitudinal research has shown, for example, that the *same* individuals are more likely to be involved in crime when single or divorced than when married (e.g., Blokland & Nieuwebeerta, 2005). In other words, social factors and local life circumstances are said to influence the decision to participate in crime. In fact, researchers have argued that most adult routine roles (e.g., fatherhood) are inconsistent with a delinquent lifestyle, which usually is characterized by unstructured and unsupervised routines activities. Giordano et al. (2003) have emphasized the importance of the subjective quality of these life experiences and cognitive interpretation of those rather than simply their presence or absence from the individual's life course.

The adult roles, in contrast, involve structured and prosocial expectations that work, intimate relationships, family, and community roles may bring. Once these new adult roles are established, they become valued, and are, therefore, protected and guarded (Mulvey et al., 2004). As with the above hypotheses, there is research that challenges any simple correspondence between the young adulthood stage and the access to prosocial turning points. Unlike life course criminologists, developmental criminologists assert that turning points and life transitions in the initial adulthood stage are more problematic, and even relatively dependent from an individual's developmental history (e.g., Loeber et al., 2008). In other words, latter theorists question whether most, let alone all, older adolescents and young adults either have sufficient access to prosocial adult roles or similarly can necessarily benefit from their influence to desist from crime. Regarding the latter theme, and in line with Elder's (1989) age-graded perspective on life transitions, there is research that indicated that these early stages' entry into work and marriage was not associated with a decrease in offending and, even possibly, contributed to the maintaining

of offending. For example, according to Uggen (2000), only after about age 26 did work appeared to become a turning point with respect to desistance. Furthermore, longitudinal research examining the long-term criminal careers show that such age-graded changes in life circumstances only have a modest impact on offending (Blokland & Nieuwebeerta, 2005). Longitudinal research examining the role of work and marriage on offending trajectories and desistance from crime lead researchers to the conclusion that, while social life circumstances do impact offending patterns, the importance of these factors might have been overstated as much of the age effect on crime remains unexplained. For example, research suggests that social factors and life circumstances might be more important for some individuals than others and that chronic, persistent offenders are less likely to desist from crime as a result their entry into adult roles (e.g., Blokland & Nieuwebeerta, 2005) compare to other individuals involved in crime and delinquency (e.g., occasional offenders).

Furthermore, social control explanations of desistance may work best for young persons that are in life stages that are defined by their dependency. Adulthood, however, characterizes a period or an ever increasing number of experiences, social influences and contexts representing options that were not available at earlier life stages as well as more leverage to choose and influence their course of actions. In that regard, Giordano et al. (2003) suggested that "...even individuals whose lives can be considered quite limited and marginal, *as adults* are exposed to an ever increasing number of experiences, others and contexts." This somewhat larger social and spatial arena of adulthood presents the actor with potential influences and options that were not available earlier on. In addition, adults, compared with children, have greater behavioral leeway; that is ability to influence the specific course of action they will take. Actors of all ages undoubtedly possess the capacity to make agentic moves, but certain phases of life will tend to facilitate or inhibit this basic capacity to take efficacious individual action. Thus, attention to reflective, intentional processes (changing cognitions) seems well suited to a focus on behavioral changes that occur during the adult years (i.e., desistance). While life transitions such as marriage, employment, pregnancy, and parenthood should be considered primary desistance experiences, Giordano et al. (2003) also stressed the presence of secondary processes such as reduced susceptibility to peer pressure and movement toward more prosocial peers even in the absence of a partner/spouse.

## Developmental Explanations

Better understanding person–environment interactions throughout life course are much needed to describe the process by which someone desist from crime. Moffitt (1993) offered perhaps one of the most convincing description and explanation of desistance from antisocial behavior using a developmental framework. This framework stipulates that the age of onset of antisocial behavior is intrinsically tied to desistance. According to this theory, there are two meta-trajectory of antisocial behavior: the life-course persists and the adolescent-limited. Life-course persistent antisocial behavior is characterized by a childhood-onset and persistence and

aggravation throughout adolescence into adulthood. These individuals are most likely to be multi-problem youth characterized by neuropsychological deficits in conjunction with a criminogenic familial environment. According to her model, it is not so much the neuropsychological deficits or the criminogenic familial environment that are conducive to long-term persistence of offending, but a developmental process by which a vulnerable children with executive function deficits repeatedly interacts with a familial environment that is ill prepared to act and react to the child's difficult and disruptive behavior and such negative reactions can further entrench the child's behavioral and emotional problems. The adolescent-limited group presents a delinquency that is short-lived, transitory, and circumspect to the period of adolescence. Contrary to their life-course persistent counterpart, these youth do not present an early onset of antisocial behavior in spite of their adolescent-limited involvement in crime and delinquency. Contrary to Sampson and Laub (2005) assertions, Moffitt (1993) contends that access to adult roles are not independent from individuals' developmental history. On the one hand, the theory asserts that life-course persisters suffer from the cumulative disadvantages or their early and persistent antisocial behavior which can disrupt their school performance, which in turn will impact their educational achievement, and consequently their access to fulfilling, rewarding, and stable jobs. On the other hand, late-onset adolescent-limited antisocial behavior only emerges after youth have accumulated the individual and interpersonal skills and stronger attachments necessary to access adult roles conducive to desistance from crime. In other words, these adolescent-limited offenders did not experience the early-onset of behavioral problems during the formative years that can disrupt the development and create long-last cumulative deficits. Moffitt's theory recognizes that some youth presenting all the characteristics of an adolescent-limited antisocial behavior may be ensnared into adult criminal activities due to the negative consequence of their implications in juvenile delinquency (e.g., teen pregnancy, drug abuse, arrest/conviction). More recently, Stouthamer-Loeber, Wei, Loeber, and Masten (2004) examined the data from the Pittsburgh Youth Study on the development of delinquency and found that youth involved in serious delinquency with gang ties who endorsed an antisocial lifestyle and use hard drugs were more likely to persist offending into adulthood. While Moffitt's original developmental model has received empirical validation (e.g., Piquero & Moffitt, 2005), results suggest that there are additional developmental patterns not accounted by the developmental model.

## **Common Explanations of Desistance and Sexual Offending**

The scientific literature on the theoretical, clinical and empirical factors linked to desistance from sexual offending is in its infancy (Laws & Ward, 2011). Currently, there is little theoretical or empirical work suggesting that factors supporting desistance from sexual offending are distinct or different than those from general offending. It could be reasonably assumed that the same factors responsible for desistance from general offending also by extension favor desistance from sexual offending.

Aging, self-identity, access to social roles, informal social controls, deterrence and negative consequences of offending as well as key developmental factors could theoretically explain desistance from sexual offending the same way these factors are said to explain desistance from offending. At the very least, for a research perspective, the importation of criminological research on desistance from crime and delinquency can be justified on the observation that individuals involved in sexual offenses tend to be involved in other crime types (e.g., Lussier, 2005). Researchers have, for the most part, exported ideas from the criminological literature to examine the factors associated with desistance from sexual offending.

### *Static Explanations*

According to Lussier and Cale (2013), there are two main schools of thought explaining the propensity to sexually reoffend over time. These two schools of thought emerged following controversies and debate surrounding the risk assessment of sexual recidivism and whether or not risk assessors should consider the role of age and aging. While the criminological literature recognizes that the age play a key role on offending over time, whether because of a direct effect and/or indirectly through a maturation effect, it remained unclear whether it also applied to sexual offending. For some researchers, therefore, the age–crime curve does not apply to sexual offending and risk assessment need not to be adjusted for the offender’s age at assessment. This perspective is known as the static-propensity approach. Other researchers, however, argued instead that there is an age effect and risk assessors should adjust individual’s level of risk according to their age at assessment. In other word, this static-maturational hypothesis impacts the propensity to sexually reoffend over time. These two school of thoughts are presented below.

The static-propensity approach suggests that historical and relatively unchangeable factors are sufficient to identify individuals most likely to sexually reoffend over time. The key assumption here is that the propensity to sexually offend is relatively stable over time and, therefore, risk assessment tools should only be used for measuring the full spectrum of this propensity. For static-propensity theorists, the only age factors that risk assessors should include are those reflecting a high propensity to reoffend, such as an early age of onset and indicators of past criminal activity. For example, Harris and Rice (2007) argued that the effect of aging on recidivism is small. In fact, they argued that age of onset is a better risk marker for reoffending than age at release. In other words, those who start their criminal career earlier in adulthood show an increased risk of reoffending irrespective of age and aging. Therefore, according to the static-propensity hypothesis, older offenders with high actuarial risk scores represent the same risk of sexually reoffending as younger offenders with similar scores (Doren, 2004; Harris & Rice, 2007). Their findings showed that the offender’s age-at-release did not provide significant incremental predictive validity over actuarial risk assessment scores (i.e., VRAG) and age of onset. However, this could be explained, in part, by the fact that age of onset

and age at release were strongly related, that is, early-onset offenders are more likely to be released younger than late-onset offenders. The high covariance between these two age factors might have limited researchers in finding a statistical age at release effect in multivariate analyses. Furthermore, looking at the predictive validity of the VRAG and the SORAG (Quinsey, Harris, Rice, & Cormier, 1998), Barbaree, Langton, and Blanchard (2007) found that after correcting for age at release, the predictive accuracy of instruments decreased significantly, suggesting that an age effect was *embedded* in the risk assessment score and the risk factors included in such tools (see also, Lussier & Healey, 2009). Indeed, if actuarial tools have been developed by identifying risk factors that are empirically linked to sexual reoffending and the risk of sexually reoffending peaks when offenders are in their 20s, it stands to reason that characteristics of this age group are most likely to be captured and included in actuarial tools. Consequently, scores of risk assessment tools might be more accurate with younger offenders, but might overestimate the risk of older offenders.

The static-maturational perspective refers to the idea that the risk of sexual (re) offending is subject to some maturational effect across the life course (Barbaree et al., 2007; Hanson, 2006; Lussier & Healey, 2009). It is based on the idea that the age-crime curve also applies to sexual offending. The static-maturation hypothesis is based on the assumption of a stable propensity to sexually reoffend, but the risk of reoffending changes with age and aging. In other words, the rank ordering of individuals (between-individual differences) on a continuum of risk to reoffend remains stable, but the offending rate decreases (within-individual changes) in a relatively similar fashion across individuals. For example, Barbaree, Blanchard, and Langton (2003) argued that if the sexual drive is a key component of sexual aggression and this drive is age-dependent, it stands to reason that an age-effect should characterize sexual aggression across the life course. It was determined that the offender's age at release contributes significantly to the prediction of reoffending, over and above scores on various risk factors said to capture sex offenders' propensity to reoffend. In fact, sexual recidivism studies have reported that, after adjusting for the scores on Static-99, the risk of sexual reoffending significantly decreased for every 1-year increase in age after release (Hanson, 2006; Lussier & Healey, 2009; Thornton, 2006). Clearly, these two perspectives highlight the need for a closer look at age, aging, and sexually offending over the life course.

### ***Age and Aging***

Research has shown over and over that only a minority of individuals having been convicted for a sexual offense sexually reoffend following their release (e.g., Hanson et al., 2003; Proulx & Lussier, 2001). In line with the static-maturational hypothesis, one of the key factors associated with the absence of sexual recidivism across individuals and subgroups of offenders has been shown to be the offender's age at the time of release (Barbaree et al., 2003; Doren, 2006; Hanson, 2006; Harris

& Rice, 2007; Lussier & Healey, 2009; Prentky & Lee, 2007; Thornton, 2006; Wollert, 2006; Wollert, Cramer, Waggoner, Skelton, & Vess, 2010). Empirical studies have consistently shown an inverse significant relationship between the age at release and sexual recidivism. In fact, a meta-analysis conducted with a large sample of sex offenders showed that the correlation of the individual's age at release was in the low 10s for sexual recidivism and in the mid 20s for nonsexual violent recidivism (Hanson & Bussière, 1998). These results suggest that the age effect might be more pronounced for violent reoffending compared with other types of reoffending which may have to do with the lower base rate of sexual recidivism. Looking more closely at these findings, results show that young adults in their early 20s represent the group most likely to sexually reoffend after their release. In fact, researchers generally include items reflecting the offender's age at the time of assessment in risk assessment instrument to assess the risk of sexual recidivism (e.g., Quinsey et al., 1998; Hanson & Thornton, 2000). However, these actuarial instruments differ as to the cutoff age at which the risk is considered to be higher (i.e., being less than 25, 27, 30 years age, etc.). Research has also shown that older offenders present a very low risk of sexual reoffending. Offenders in their 50s show a significant decline in risk of reoffending compared with offenders in their 20s and 30s (Barbaree et al., 2003). In fact, data indicated that sexual recidivism rates are as low as 2 % over a 5-year period for offenders aged 60 and older (Hanson, 2006; Thornton, 2006; Lussier & Healey, 2009). Indeed, longitudinal studies have demonstrated that the risk of sexual recidivism decreases steadily as the offender's age increases from the time of his release (Barbaree et al., 2003; Barbaree et al., 2007). The linear decrease was found for sexual (Barbaree et al., 2003; Hanson, 2002; Lussier & Healey, 2009; Thornton, 2006; Prentky & Lee, 2007) and violent reoffending (including sexual offenses) (e.g., Fazel, Sjöstedt, Långström, & Grann, 2006).

Although a downward linear trend appears to characterize the risk of reoffending as the offender's age at release increases, other findings suggest that the age–sexual recidivism relationship is more complex. Researchers generally agree on the recidivism rates of the younger adult offenders and older offenders, but there is controversy about the age effect occurring for other offenders. Three main points have been at the core of the debate about the link between aging and reoffending in adult offenders: (a) identification of the age at which the risk of reoffending peaks; (b) how to best represent the trend in risk of reoffending between the youngest and the oldest group; and (c) the possibility of differential age–crime curves of reoffending. One hypothesis states that, when excluding the youngest and oldest group of offenders, age at release and the risk of sexual recidivism might be best represented by a plateau. Thornton (2006) argued that the inverse correlation revealed in previous studies may have been the result of the differential reoffending rates of the youngest and oldest age groups, rather than a steadily declining risk of reoffending. In that regard, one study presented sample statistics suggesting a plateau between the early 20s and the 60s+ age groups (Langan, Schmitt, & Durose, 2003). No statistical analyses were reported between the groups, thus limiting possible conclusions for that hypothesis. Another hypothesis suggests there might be a curvilinear relation-

ship between age at release and sexual recidivism, at least for a subgroup of offenders. Hanson (2002) found empirical evidence of a linear relationship between age and recidivism for rapists and incest offenders but a curvilinear relationship was found for extrafamilial child molesters (see also, Prentky & Lee, 2007). Whereas the former two groups showed higher recidivism rates in young adulthood (i.e., 18–24), the group of extrafamilial child molesters appeared to be at increased risk when released at an older age (i.e., 25–35). This led researchers to conclude that, although rapists are at highest risk in their 20s, the corresponding period for child molesters appears to be in their 30s. These results, however, have been criticized on methodological grounds, such as the use of small samples of offenders, the presence of a small base rate of sexual reoffending, the use of uneven width of age categories to describe the data, the failure to control for the time at risk after release, and the number of previous convictions for a sexual crime (Barbaree et al., 2003; Lussier & Healey, 2009; Thornton, 2006). More recent research, however, with a large sample of individuals convicted for a sexual offense shows that the age-invariance effect is present across individuals, irrespective of their static risk of sexual recidivism (Wollert et al., 2010).

The aging effect has been examined differently in the context of the unfolding of offending activities over time. Amirault and Lussier (2011) examined the predictive value of a past conviction in a sample of incarcerated adult males all convicted at least once for a sexual offense. Rather than comparing the sexual recidivism rates of individual with and without a prior conviction, these researchers looked at the offender's age at the time of each past conviction. The results were in line with those reported by Kurlychek, Brame, and Bushway (2006) as well as those by Bushway, Nieuwebeerta, and Blokland (2011) with general samples. Amirault and Lussier (2011) found that older past conviction lost their predictive value for general, violent as well as sexual recidivism. Furthermore, only recent past charges and convictions were predictive of recidivism in this sample of adult offenders. In other words, not recognizing whether past convictions are recent or date far back might overestimate or underestimate the risk of reoffending for this population. More recently, Nakamura and Blumstein (2015) analyzed the hazard and survival probability of a group of individuals who were arrested for the first time as adults in New York in 1980, 1985, or 1990. The results demonstrated that, in terms of the recidivism for any offense, sex offenders tend to have a lower risk of general recidivism than other subtypes of offenders (see also, Sample & Bray, 2003). Furthermore, the risk of sexual recidivism reported for this sample was much smaller than the risk of recidivism for any offense due to the low prevalence of sexual offending (about 2 % of all rearrests). When these researchers compared to the risk of sex offense arrest for sexual offenders to that of the general population, the sex offenders' risk of recidivism remains higher during the 10-year follow-up. Although sex offenders' sexual recidivism did not seem to become comparable to the risk of general population, the concept of risk tolerance was not examined in this study. While evidence of redemption is emerging from longitudinal study, it remains unclear what are the underlying factors promoting desistance in this population.

## *Individual and Social Factors*

The growing consensus among scholars of the presence of an age effect on sexual offending combined to the relatively low sexual recidivism rates has generated interest for factors explaining desistance from sexual offending. While the field of research on desistance from crime has been focused on contextual factors (e.g., turning points, developmental stages and life transitions) and those factors that are external to the offenders, the field of sexual violence and abuse has somewhat limited the scope to those that are internal (e.g., age, aging). The rationale for this different focus is unclear but it implicitly suggests that sexual offending is driven by a specific propensity for sexual crimes that can be measured through individual differences. Farmer, Beech, and Ward (2012) conducted a qualitative study in order to describe the process of desistance using a very small sample child sexual abusers ( $n=10$ ) in a sex offender treatment program in the United Kingdom. They compared a group of five potentially active sexual offenders to a group of five potentially desisters using cognitive-based themes identified by Maruna (2001). Desistance was operationalized using “self-narratives,” by detecting the presence of five different themes, that is, redemption, generativity, agency, communion, and contamination. Both groups were identified using a semi-structured clinical judgment conducted by therapists. The study findings show that, on the one hand, individuals in the desisting group identified treatment as being a turning point in their lives and reported a better sense of personal agency and an internalized locus of control. On the other hand, individuals in the persistent group were more likely to blame external factors for their life difficulties. Potential desisters reported the importance and significance of belonging to a social group or being part of a social network while the group identified as potentially active described feeling socially isolated. Similarly, Harris (2014) examined and compared three theoretical perspectives on desistance from offending: (1) natural desistance, in other words aging out of crime; (2) cognitive transformation of the self; and (3) informal social control. Using qualitative data collected from 21 men convicted of sexual offenses who returned to the community and were taking part in a treatment program, the study findings provided mixed support for these three theories. Notably, concerning informal social controls, many participants addressed the obstacles to having a relationship or an employment and the consequences of the stigma associated to being a convicted sex offender.

Kruttschnitt, Uggen, and Shelton (2000) were among the first to report about the social factors of desistance from sexual offending. While they used the term desistance from sexual offending, their conceptualization and operationalization of desistance was no different than those used in the past 50 years of research on sexual recidivism (Hanson et al., 2003). While their measure of desistance as an event was subject to the limitations raised earlier (e.g., vulnerable to the intermittency of offending), this study was nonetheless important as it provided a first look at indicators of formal and informal social controls and its role of persistence/desistance. Indeed, following the work of Sampson and Laub (1995), Kruttschnitt et al. (2000) examined the impact of formal (e.g., criminal justice sanctions) and informal



(e.g., family, employment) social control mechanisms on recidivism among 556 sex offenders placed on probation in Minnesota in 1992. Desistance was operationalized in various ways such as the absence of a new arrest for any crime, personal crime, as well as sex crimes over a period of about 5 years. Using a series of survival analyses, the authors found that most individuals on probation did not sexually reoffend within 5 years after the start of the follow-up period. When looking at desistance from any crime, findings showed that job but not marriage stability was related to desistance from crime during the study period. In fact, those with stable employment at the time of sentencing were approximately 37 % less likely to be rearrested for any crime. The same effect was reported for personal crimes but not sexual crimes. In other words, contrary to Sampson and Laub (2003) assertions, job stability was not associated with lower risk of sexually reoffending during the study period. What the study showed, however, was that participation in a court-ordered sex offender treatment program more specifically for those showing employment stability was associated with desistance from sexual offending. In other words, individuals with stable work histories receiving a sex offender treatment program were significantly less likely to sexually reoffend. This could be interpreted as suggesting that desistance from sexual offending is most likely to occur when formal (i.e., court-ordered treatment) and informal (i.e., work) social control mechanisms are present and operating. It could also reflect Giordano et al. (2002) hypothesis of cognitive shifts in the presence of hooks (i.e., prosocial experience) for change.

More recently, Blokland and van der Geest (2015) used data from the Criminal Career and Life Course Study (CCLS), a longitudinal study of a cohort of individuals who had their a criminal case adjudicated in 1977 in the Netherlands. The study, has allowed researchers to map out the entire criminal history of these individuals up to age 72. This is perhaps one of the most complete analyses of the criminal activity of individuals convicted for a sexual offense. From this group, Blokland and van der Geest (2015) examined the desistance pattern of the entire population of individuals whose 1977 criminal case pertained to a sexual crime (about 4 % of the entire sample;  $n=500$ ). During the entire 25 year-follow period, about 30 % of the population were reconvicted for a sexual offense which is congruent with the scientific literature for such a long follow-up period (e.g., Hanson et al., 2003). While historical factors such as having a prior sexual offense was related to sexual recidivism, life course social circumstances were not. Similar to the Kruttschnitt et al. (2000) study findings, being employed as well as not having alcohol/drug issues in 1977 were not related to desistance. They did not examine, however, the presence of an interaction effect between participation in a sex offender treatment program and employment. Furthermore, individuals who were married had lower sexual recidivism rates, again, contrary to what had been reported in the Kruttschnitt et al. (2000) study. Of importance, sexual recidivism rates were not different across subtypes of offenders. The contradictory findings between the Blokland and the Kruttschnitt study raise several issues. For example, the Kruttschnitt et al. study is more vulnerable to the issue of offending intermittency compared to the Blokland and van der Geest (2015) study which examined desistance over a 25-year period. In light of the Blokland et al. findings, the Kruttschnitt et al. study findings might simply be reflective of temporary conformity for those individu-

als subject to increased social controls. But as those social controls mechanisms erode, offenders could revert back to old patterns and sexually reoffend. Clearly, more research is needed with repeated measurement of life circumstances over time. If anything, these studies highlight the urgent needs of additional research to examine the role of individual and social factors on desistance from sexual offending.

For adolescents involved in sexual offenses, the period of *emerging adulthood* appears to be a critical turning point where most youth desist from sexual offending (Lussier et al., 2012; Lussier & Blokland, 2014; Lussier, Blokland et al., 2015). Emerging adulthood (18–25 years) is described as a transition period between adolescence and adulthood. During this period, individuals are relatively independent from parents, yet are still in the process of obtaining education and training for a long-term adult occupation, and while they may cohabit with an intimate partner, they are unmarried or not in a common-law relationship and have yet to have established a stable residence and to have children (Arnett, 2000). Interestingly, work, marriage and parenthood have all been described by life-course criminologists as key factors leading to desistance from crime (e.g., Sampson & Laub, 2003). Therefore, it is unlikely that such social factors play a role in the desistance process of these youth as desistance from sexual offending appears to occur earlier than entry into these social roles. In western countries, it is suggested that emerging adults are more concerned about accepting responsibility for their actions, deciding on one's beliefs and values, establishing an equal relationship with their parents, and becoming financially independent, and less concerned with thinking about their career, marriage, and parenthood (Arnett, 2000). In effect, in contrast with Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) general theory of crime, the number of plausible life directions during this period of emerging adulthood is greater than for any other developmental period (Arnett, 2000; Giordano et al., 2002). Given the number of possible directions, it is unlikely that all juvenile offenders go through this developmental stage experiencing these changes or experiencing these changes the same way. While discontinuity of sexual offending is important in adolescent offenders, the role of transitioning into emerging adulthood on such desistance patterns remains unclear. Clearly, more research is needed to examine whether the factors promoting desistance from sexual offending are age-graded. While these findings have not been validated, they do raise the issue of studying desistance in the current sociolegal context where sex offenders have been socially constructed as pariahs and monsters (Simon, 1998) which undoubtedly impacts at least some of the underlying processes responsible for desistance from sexual offending.

## Summary

Several definitions of desistance from crime have been proposed and measured by researchers. These definitions somewhat overlap on certain aspects of desistance but also capture relatively distinctive ones. For example, recidivism studies capture probabilities of maintaining a non-offending state over time but does not inform

about other aspects of offending (e.g., acceleration, deceleration). Offending trajectories inform about possible patterns of desistance but this perspective, while informative about long-term patterns, is somewhat limited when it comes to short-term predictions and interventions. Together, these viewpoints provide a more complete conceptualization of desistance from crime. As argued in this chapter, desistance is not a random process. It is relatively bounded to the precocity and the level of prior involvement in crime and delinquency. Of importance, offending trajectories characterized by a distinct pattern of desistance in terms of timing, deceleration and probabilities of reoffending have been identified. Clearly, therefore, the phenomenon of desistance from crime is diverse and complex and should be understood as being multifaceted involving multiple pathways. Desistance is best described as a process possibly involving a series of lapses and relapses. From this viewpoint, the presence of lapses and relapses highlight the limitation of a crude offending descriptor such as being a “recidivist.” The developmental perspective suggests that this process involves deceleration and de-escalation of offending until termination. Deceleration is intrinsically related to the velocity of offending prior to the start of deceleration of offending. In other words, the more important and serious offending becomes, the longer the desistance phase will be. Considering the range of offending trajectories found for individuals involved in sexual offenses, this process is likely to be relatively short and abrupt for some and slow and gradual for others. Desistance implies the probability of maintaining a non-offending state over time. Recidivism studies have been insightful with respect to the presence of much heterogeneity as to the risk of recidivism at any given time across offenders. Young adult offenders who have maintained a non-offending state are among those most likely to move back to an offending state. Even in the presence of protective factors promoting the deceleration of offending in place, negative life events (e.g., alcohol/drug use, financial difficulties, significant interpersonal conflicts, and negative mood) may favor the movement away from a non-offending state back to an offending state. Given the heterogeneity in the probabilities of offending in adulthood and that these probabilities are not static, but dynamic and subject to several factors starting with the process of aging. In other words, with age, the probabilities of a relapse decrease. Finally, termination of offending or the maintenance of a non-offending state over time may be difficult to achieve for those whose prior offending involvement is more frequent, where the deceleration has not started, and the probabilities of reoffending remain relatively high. Taken together, this proposed unified concept of desistance encompasses the combination of population heterogeneity and state-dependent processes.

For the last three decades, policy development in the area of sexual violence and abuse has been limited to environment-focused interventions and measures to deter individuals from sexually reoffending (Lussier, Gress, Deslauriers-Varin, & Amirault, 2014). The sexual offender registry, public notification, denying/limiting parole, intensive supervision, and home residency restrictions are examples of risk-focused interventions that have little to do with desistance as it is currently understood from available research. In fact, Shover and Henderson (1995) have argued that crime control policies need not be only focused on deterrence and the threat of punishment, but also on increasing legitimate opportunities as increased

opportunities extent the number of life options for these individuals. Important research and policy questions that arise are, among other things, whether (a) the current policy landscape regarding the prevention of sexual violence and abuse significantly limit offenders opportunities with respect to experiencing these hooks for change or turning points that are pivotal for desistance from crime, (b) the hooks for change and turning points that appear to play an important role on desistance from crime also operate more specifically for sexual offending. While there is little doubt that repressive policies focusing on neutralization and deterrence negatively impact social opportunities upon reentry, the mechanisms responsible for desistance from sexual offending remain unclear due mainly to the relative absence of research on this topic.

Explanations of desistance from crime and delinquency can be organized along three promising dimensions. The first dimension can be characterized by the role and importance of internal processes and individual factors, such as aging, maturity, and self-identity change. The second dimension refers to those models and hypotheses stressing the role and importance of the environmental factors, such as the opportunity structure, negative consequences of offending as well as the role and influence of peers. A third dimension refers to those models emphasizing person–environment interactions and the context in which these interactions take place, such as the developmental life course perspective and the role and importance of life transitions and turning points. This latter dimension is perhaps the most promising, theoretically as well as for policy development, especially for those individuals with more substantial involvement in crime and delinquency as well as high-risk offenders. The presence of hooks for change as suggested by Giordano et al. (2002) or turning points as formulated by Sampson and Laub (2003) that favor cognitive shifts and cognitive reappraisal as well as significant behavior and lifestyle changes are promising explanatory avenues that researchers have yet to fully describe, analyze, and understand. Furthermore, it is unclear whether such mechanisms also apply to sexual offending or individuals involved in sexual offenses, but emerging results are indicative of similar trends. After all, looking at the limited research, both Kruttschnitt et al. (2000) as well as Lussier and Gress (2014) both reported significant person–environment interactions effects associated with positive outcomes in different samples of individuals convicted for a sexual offense. The Kruttschnitt et al. (2000) study reiterated the importance of social factors (e.g., job) in combination with individual-focus interventions while the Lussier and Gress (2014) findings suggest that measures helping individuals cutting ties with negative peer influences, in line with Warr (1998) hypothesis, increased positive community reentry outcomes. Given the state of empirical research on desistance from crime, more generally, and desistance from sexual offending, more specifically, these conclusions should be seen as tentative.

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