



Intentions and institutions: Turning points and adolescents' moral threshold



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ABSTRACT

Morality is reemerging into sociological analyses; however social psychological mechanisms are currently underutilized within life course studies. This paper examines a key potential life course turning point in the careers of adolescents who encounter the criminal justice system to demonstrate the moral dimension of desistance from criminal activity. We explore the relationship between social institutions and individual intentions by looking at cognitive and emotional reactions adolescents report encountering the criminal justice system, offering a hypothetical model highlighting the central place of shame – a quintessential moral emotion brought about either by institutional pressures or feedback from significant others – in the process of shifting life course intentions. We focus on these ways that individual 'moral thresholds' may shift, potentially leading to life course turning points.

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“[C]haracter change is anchored in the changed relation the individual can demonstrate to the moral order.”
(Sabini & Silver, 1982, p. 162)

Life course theory claims turning points as one of its key principles (Elder, 1994), with one of the prime areas of focus involving criminological treatments of desistance. Both literatures are served by incorporating a focus on morality (Wikstrom, 2006). Desistance from crime is a core aspect of transitioning to adulthood (Massoglia & Uggen, 2007). In this paper, we unpack one portion of the desistance process (Bushway, Piquero, Broidy, Cauffman, & Mazerolle 2001), in the service of highlighting its moral component as an example of a wider life course process. Turning points can involve moral triggers, we argue, that shift core self-labels. Adolescents encountering the criminal justice system are at a crucial step in the development of non-criminal self-narratives (Maruna, 2001). We broaden this approach by drawing on social psychology to bring context to the process

whereby social institutions systematically attempt to change an actor's "moral threshold" (Wikstrom, 2007), the point where breaking moral or legal rules appears as a legitimate course of action and people turn away from previous life course trajectories.

We use data from the Reintegrative Shaming Experiments (RISE) (Sherman & Strang, 1997), illustrating how desistance intentions are part of a social labeling process that triggers moral self-evaluation. These potential turning points are augmented if the justice system, peers, or family trigger certain emotional and cognitive reactions to shift intentions about future activity, an institutionally based, moral process of self-concept evaluation.

1. Turning points in action: desistance from adolescent criminality

Turning points (e.g., Elder, 1986) occur when individual life course trajectories shift in new directions, either as a result of individual volition and/or institutional pressures. The literature on life course turning points is only

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tangentially related to the social psychology of identities, but both processes run parallel as people inhabit social positions and develop self-understandings in terms of those positions. These observations are at the bedrock of life course studies and social psychology (Elder, 1994). We attempt to bridge these perspectives through an understanding of how an individual's sense of self (Owens, Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2010), anchored in a sense of morality (Hitlin, 2008), encounters potential turning points.

People desist from crime due to a combination of internal and external pressures (Welch et al., 2005). Desistance is properly conceived of as a process, not a static event (Bushway et al., 2001; Bushway, Thornberry, & Krohn, 2003). Adolescent deviant activity imperfectly predicts adult criminality; most juvenile delinquents desist from committing property and violent crime by the age of 32 (Sampson & Laub, 2003b). Potential turning points are not the same for each juvenile. Rather, it is the extent to which an adolescent takes ownership of having committed a moral violation and perceives the sanctioning to be legitimate (Sherman, 1993), triggering shame or lower self-esteem that predicts desistance orientations. Such social psychological shifts, or turning points, are fostered by the reflected appraisals of family, friends, and institutional authorities.

Encountering the criminal justice system is an important turning point in such adolescents' fledgling criminal careers, though most people who break the law do not encounter this system since many crimes are not reported to the police (Kuehnle & Sullivan, 2001), especially if the offender is a juvenile (Finkelhor & Wolak, 2003). The majority of those that do desist from crime as they age out of adolescence (Land & Nagin, 1996; Laub & Sampson, 2001; Moffitt, Caspi, Harrington, & Milne, 2002; Nagin, Farrington, & Moffitt, 1995) though some shift to different sorts of offending (Massoglia, 2006). We know more about the demographics of desistance than its mechanisms (Giordano, Schroeder, & Cernkovich, 2007; Laub & Sampson, 2001), and we suggest these turning points shape individual moral thresholds, an important later situational factor for understanding criminal activity. Laub and Sampson (2001) highlight desistance as a potentially prime life course turning point and suggest that a decision to desist has a number of contributing factors: formal and informal negative consequences, internal motivation, cognitive restructuring, social monitoring of behavior and perceived social support. Intimate bonds, in particular marriage partners, decrease criminal behavior (Sampson & Laub, 2003a).¹

Within criminological theorizing, Situational Action Theory (Wikstrom, 2006, 2007, 2010) attempts to bridge four desistance frameworks: maturation, development, rational choice, and social learning that Sampson and Laub (2003a) highlight. SAT is based in the understanding that moral concerns are primary in people's situated action, and holds that people have first-order temptations that may

shift as they age, the possibility for rational choices and/or self-control (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990) to be exerted over those temptations, and that these are shaped and influenced by social environments. This theory is less concerned with ongoing identities established within an ongoing life course and more concerned with situational influences contributing to or hindering criminal activity, but it's focus on moral impulses is important for our fledgling model of turning points.

Labeling theory is the common approach within criminological theorizing about the ongoing continuance or desistance from criminal activity, with important models (e.g., Heimer & Matsueda, 1994; Matsueda & Heimer, 1997) prioritizing the nature of individual identities. Here, too, we see a partial aspect of our own model (discussed below), linking turning points to the feedback of significant others (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Giordano et al., 2007; Sampson & Laub, 2003a). We build on labeling theory by suggesting that feedback triggering one's moral identity – that experiencing a label as a potential criminal as a moral violation – will shift intentions to create a life course turning point away from a deviant trajectory. Labeling theory suggests that a label as 'criminal' becomes an identity that potential offenders build a life course trajectory around. We suggest that it is the fear of a label, *to the extent such a label sets off a moral emotion*, motivates adolescent intentions to desist from future criminal activity. We illustrate models consistent with the idea that two moral factors, the emotion of shame and the global self-evaluation of self-esteem, are important factors in the modal shift away from potential criminal careers.

2. How moral identity influences turning points

An interplay occurs, we suggest, between internal standards/perceptions and external pressures, with both shaping "moral habits" such that certain options become less appealing, developing self-control that allows one to overcome criminal temptations. We focus on institutionalized "turning points" (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003), designed to shift adolescent intentions toward desistance from future criminal activity. Seeing oneself as morally worthy involves the internalization of reflected appraisals (evaluative frameworks) that potentially shape desires about what behaviors are proper, required, or forbidden. We suggest two core self-evaluations based on the reflected appraisals of others – self-esteem and shame – serve to motivate the desire to make a particular event a life course turning point.

With respect to encountering the criminal justice system, Maruna (2001) suggests that there is little empirical evidence for the power of shame in reforming offenders. Our model is informed by Tyler, Sherman, Stang, Barnes, and Woods (2007) and their studies of a particular institutional encounter designed to promote a certain version of shame. We employ and organize additional social psychological processes to situate the power of shame within an organized understanding of the moral actor, suggesting at the same time that shame brought on by peers and family is as motivational for shifts as the institutional encounter, itself. Like Wikstrom (2006), we hold moral codes to be an

¹ Self-control is not a stable personality factor. Rather, it is like a muscle (Twenge & Baumeister, 2002) that can get fatigued in times of heavy use or chronic stress.

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