
The Career Concept in Criminological Research

THE TERM “CAREER,” which is of French origin, originally meant carriage road or racing track. Today it is primarily used to connote profession or occupation, especially that which carries the possibility of promotion. The term thus concerns either a profession or the progress in a person’s working or professional life.

Sociologically, the career concept has been used in organizational analyses of structures and changes, in studies related to individual career choices and strategies, and in works which combine the structural and subjective perspectives (Evetts, 1992).

Sociologist Everett C. Hughes is said to have introduced the career concept to the Chicago School (Kempf, 1987). For Hughes, the career is “the moving perspective in which the person sees his life as a whole and interprets the meaning of his various attributes, actions, and the things which happen to him” (Hughes, 1937, pp. 409–10). The career thus becomes the subjective interpretation of one’s relation to and placement in society. Interpretations change over time just as a subject’s life does, and encompass not only paid work or professional activities, but all the endeavors a person is occupied with.

The term “career” was, however, used in criminological studies at the Chicago School before Hughes defined and described it as cited above. In 1930 and 1931 Clifford R. Shaw published, respectively, *The Jack-Roller* and *The Natural History of a Delinquent Career*, both of which used the term “career” to describe the criminal histories of single individuals derived from case studies. Shaw does not define the career term but uses it to describe both the actual *activities* in which his subject is engaged and the *developmental*

process that he observes in his subject's criminal pursuits. It is thus not the subject's interpretation of his position that is the focal point here, but rather an objective description of the subject's activity.

Use of the term "career" to describe a developmental process is even more apparent in Shaw's later work *Brothers in Crime* (1938). In this book he describes the steps in criminal careers via description and analyses of the life histories of five brothers. The book's cover illustration demonstrates the thesis of an escalating criminal career. It shows a staircase where each step represents a certain type of deviant behavior or crime, and where ascending steps suggest increasingly serious criminality. Shaw's use of the career concept can thus be said to have had a relation (albeit peculiar) to the term's definition as "advancement."

Edwin Sutherland's book, *The Professional Thief* (1937), compliments Shaw's work since it also concerns a life history. The book is actually written by a professional thief, since Sutherland has simply set up boundaries and themes and then let his subject write open-endedly about them. Although Sutherland has edited the book, it is the language of the subject that is used. The thief does not use the term "career," but his use of the term "professional" corresponds to it. Being a "professional thief" requires that one make a living by committing thefts and use all of one's (working) hours to do so. It further suggests that one plans in advance on the basis of learned techniques and skills. In this context there is little difference between a criminal career and a law-abiding profession.

Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck were the first to use the career concept in a quantitative criminological study. Their longitudinal investigation of institutionalized young offenders resulted in three major works: *500 Criminal Careers* (1930), a follow-up study, *Later Criminal Careers* (1937), and a final follow-up, *Criminal Careers in Retrospect* (1943). The Gluecks neglect to define the career term, but they seem to use it synonymously with "trajectory" or "life history." Thus, the Gluecks have used the Chicago School's traditional concept of the career as a "life history," but have done so via quantitative as opposed to qualitative methods. This, combined with the longitudinal technique, corresponds to what is found in the career studies dominating today.

The career term has not been used in criminological research in Denmark. The Danish criminologist Karl O. Christiansen performed analyses of individual criminal trajectories early in the 1940s, but used the more Danish term "kriminelle levnedsløb" (criminal life histories) (Christiansen, 1942). By this he meant those aspects of the individual's life that concern offenses and sanctions. Analyses of these matters focus on the

development of individual criminality (*ibid.*, p. 37). “Life histories” thus corresponds to the career term in the present criminological sense.¹

With the Interactionists’ adoption of the career term it changes its meaning from a narrow focus on activity to a description of the identity or role change, which can be associated with being labeled as a deviant. It was Edwin Lemert who first described the transition from primary to secondary deviance, and the changes entailed in personal identity and role (Lemert, 1951, pp. 75 ff.). Howard S. Becker, who had done previous studies of occupational careers in the tradition of Hughes, applied the career concept to deviance (Becker, 1966). He believes that the process and movement suggested by the term “career” is also relevant to describing a deviant career, since the latter is developed or formed as a result of a number of occurrences and influences (Becker, 1966, pp. 24 ff.). The Interactions perspective also relates changes in the person’s identity to changes in the person’s social position. The career is used to describe this process, whereby an individual understands his or her new (deviant) role (see, for example, Archard, 1979). Finally, we must mention Irving Goffman, who instead of deviant careers talks about “moral careers” (Goffman, 1961). The moral career describes the psychic course of development, which signifies the individual’s personality, identity, and perception of the self and others. The term is thus used with approximately the same meaning as deviant career, although the psychic change is more strongly emphasized.

The new wave of criminal career studies based on longitudinal designs and quantitative data began in the United States around 1980. Alfred Blumstein and Jacqueline Cohen’s analysis of individual crime frequencies is commonly cited as the beginning of the modern era of criminal career research (Blumstein and Cohen, 1979). Wolfgang’s Philadelphia cohort study (Wolfgang, Figlio, and Sellin, 1972), which came earlier, used similar quantitative methods and a longitudinal design, but Wolfgang neglected the career concept.

In their 1979 publication, Blumstein and Cohen argue that additional research is much needed in the area of criminal career research: “Despite an enormous volume of research into the causes and prevention of crime, very little is known about the progress of the individual criminal career” (Blumstein and Cohen, 1979, p. 561). They point out that knowledge concerning individual crime frequencies and age-dependent changes in those

¹ However, in the textbook Karl O. Christiansen later wrote together with Stephan Hurwitz, they used the term “criminal career” though not as used here but to connote “advancement” or “professionalism” (Hurwitz and Christiansen, 1983; here according to the Danish version 1971, p. 459).

frequencies (the subjects of their article) is particularly lacking, and that such knowledge is essential for the development of an efficient crime policy, particularly in the area of incapacitation.

In a later report, written together with Paul Hsieh, Blumstein and Cohen describe the “career” as a trajectory of the individual’s criminal activity from the first to the last offense (Blumstein, Cohen, and Hsieh, 1982). At the same time they emphasize that the use of the career term does *not* suggest that offenders are assumed to live off their crimes. “This characterization of an individual’s activity as a ‘career’ is not meant to imply that offenders derive their livelihood exclusively or even predominantly from crime. The concept of the ‘criminal career’ is intended only as a means of structuring the longitudinal sequence of criminal events associated with an individual in a systematic way” (Blumstein, Cohen, and Hsieh, 1982, pp. 5–7).

Blumstein and Cohen came to dominate the National Academy of Sciences’ panel on criminal careers, which was formed by request of the National Institute of Justice (Blumstein, Cohen, Roth, and Visher, 1986). Their final report defines the criminal career in the same manner as mentioned above, as a trajectory study of the individual’s criminal activities. Further, it is argued that criminal career studies should focus on four measures of primary importance: participation (or prevalence), individual crime frequencies (or lambda), the duration of the career, and patterns in offense seriousness.

Summary

In criminological research, the career concept is primarily used to describe a trajectory. This research concerns circumstances surrounding individual trajectories, which start with the first criminal act and end with the last.

Recent American research emphatically emphasizes that the term career is not synonymous with livelihood or profession. However, some conceptual characteristics of criminal career research correspond to aspects of occupational careers. For example, criminal career research examines whether specialization occurs, that is, a tendency to repeat the same type of crime, and suggests that skills necessary to commit more refined and successful offenses will develop through repetition. Here is an obvious parallel to ordinary occupational careers. A similar parallel is found in changes in crime seriousness over time. Escalation in the criminal career corresponds to advancement in an occupational career: One climbs in rank or in seriousness. The analogy between occupational careers and criminal careers is probably unavoidable since both concern the development of skills and techniques, and abide by the fundamental assumption that “practice makes perfect.”

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P A R T O N E

Objectives, Methodology, and Sample

Objectives

IN CRIMINOLOGICAL RESEARCH, especially that from the United States, the question of individual criminal careers has been a central theme since the beginning of the 1980s. Interest in the subject stems from insights regarding variations in individual crime frequencies. The objectives of many career studies have been to examine the possibility of predicting individual crime frequencies and distinguishing between high- and low-rate offenders. An additional aim has been to demonstrate potential means of maximizing the efficiency of the penal system.

The inspiration for the current study originates in the international research. The aim of the study is, however, less goal- and application-oriented than many of the non-Danish studies. The primary purpose of the current analysis is to obtain knowledge about and insight into the distribution of crime at the individual level and to look for patterns in individual offending. “Patterns” refers to similar or consistent trends within or between different aspects of a criminal career, that is, questions like: How is frequency related to desistance? Career studies represent a new method of breaking down and organizing data on the general structure of crime and acquiring basic knowledge about its distribution. This analysis may thus be considered as belonging to the category of basic research in criminology.

In the field of criminology, the outlining of new areas represents an especially potent form of demythologizing. Crime is a popular theme that gives rise to many common, but often inaccurate beliefs about the offender and the offender’s behavior. An underlying aim of this study has been to uncover and rectify existing misconceptions and myths.

Even if the knowledge acquired from the study of criminal careers is not immediately applicable, it still clearly represents a significant foundation for the planning of crime prevention strategies. It will undoubtedly be easier and more rewarding to design crime prevention initiatives if those initiatives are based on insight into how criminal careers develop.

Research Themes on the Criminal Career

The individual criminal career concerns a trajectory. A trajectory has a beginning and an end. The study of the criminal career will therefore include considerations of both criminal *onset* as well as *desistance*. The *duration* of the trajectory is a third theme of this research.

In addition to these time-related themes, the characteristics of the trajectory itself will be examined. One characteristic is the activity level of the individual offender and any changes therein over time (that is, the number of criminal offenses the individual commits, or the yearly *individual crime frequency*). Another characteristic concerns the types of criminal offenses and changes they undergo. This subject is examined through analyses of *specialization* and *versatility*, whether there is a tendency to repeat the same form of crime or to commit new types of crime. A third characteristic of the career concerns the *seriousness* of crime. The study therefore also includes an analysis of whether the development of a criminal career necessarily implies an *escalation* in crime seriousness.

The aforementioned themes illustrate aspects of the career itself. In addition is the more basic question of *prevalence*, or what proportion of the population actually commits crimes and can therefore be said to have a criminal career. All these considerations are intricately linked to the modern conception of the criminal career, and all are addressed in this study.

Other Themes of the Study

As opposed to the original plan, the final report includes additional, more goal-oriented substudies. This is due to necessity and possibility.

As in previous research, this study shows a very skewed individual crime frequency. The knowledge that a small percentage of the population is responsible for a significant number of offenses can easily lead to a desire to incapacitate these individuals through imprisonment. The results have therefore necessitated analyses of the possible gains of incapacitation.

During the time period covered by the study, a change in Danish law has lowered the level of sanctions for certain offenses. The data of the study

thus allow for an examination of the effects of lower sanction levels. That potential has been utilized.

Although the analysis of criminal careers can establish background knowledge for general crime prevention strategies, the additional substudies suggest what proportion of crime prevention actually results from manipulations of the penal system.

Is a Danish Study Necessary?

Since a great deal of research has been performed elsewhere in this area, it is of relevance to ask whether it is necessary to perform a new study of criminal careers. Is there reason to believe that this study will contribute to our knowledge of the criminal career?

A number of circumstances speaks to the importance of this study.

First, its sample and data size exceed those of other studies in this field. The Danish registry system (discussed in detail in Chapter 4) allows for electronic analysis of extremely large samples. The primary sample on which this study is based consists of 334,000 individuals aged 15 to 100, 45,000 of which have criminal records. The 45,000 offenders are registered for 180,000 offenses. Given the inherent variability in criminal careers, the low base rate of many of the behaviors examined, and the application of a longitudinal approach, the use of such a large dataset is likely to expose patterns that remain indiscernible in studies with smaller samples.

For instance, the size of the sample and the sampling methods used allow more powerful analyses of the criminal careers of older offenders and women. Most studies concentrate on young males. The current study uses a large, random selection of individuals aged 15–100, and is therefore well suited to investigate career patterns among middle-aged offenders – a group we know very little about. Furthermore, given the inclusion of approximately 170,000 females, the study is also well positioned to examine the criminal careers of women, a group given relatively little attention in prior research, but whose career patterns differ enormously from those of their male counterparts.

Second, this study may offer a particularly valid database for studying the criminal career since the data are presumably more complete and of a higher quality than similar data in the United States. As discussed in Chapter 4, the Danish registries include detailed information on dates, charges, and dispositions, as well as basic demographic and employment data for offenders.

The results of this study do deviate in some important ways from those found in other studies. Some differences are striking, others are more subtle,

but nonetheless suggest important nuances to the seemingly straightforward conclusions drawn in non-Danish research. Both these outcomes are at least in part a consequence of the extent and quality of the Danish registry data.

Third, this study covers a broader spectrum of the criminal career than most other analyses. Previous research has tended to examine only one or a couple of the many conceptual aspects of the criminal career in a single document. The current study examines all the important parameters of the criminal career, providing an interesting opportunity for studying holistically the relationship between diverse patterns in criminal careers. As will be seen, comparative analyses of various aspects of the criminal career provide a richer insight into the overall phenomenon.

Finally, it should be noted that the Danish population is comparatively homogeneous in race, ethnicity, and social class. This homogeneity adds an interesting dimension to cross-cultural comparisons and eliminates many of the extreme variations that complicate U.S. research. In addition, police registry data can be assumed more valid than that found in the United States, since it is less likely to reflect criminal justice system biases against racial minorities or the poor.

Presentation and Limitations

The book is divided into four parts. The first part is dominated by a discussion of the study's methodology and raw data. The abundance of detail in these chapters is necessary as documentation for the quality of the data, the methodological and contextual comparability to previous (non-Danish) research, and the validity of the results.

The second part of the book constitutes its central core. Different themes related to the study of criminal careers are discussed here. The methodology of the current study is also outlined, as are the results, which are compared to the findings of past research.

The crime prevention effect of manipulations of the penal system is addressed in the book's third part, together with a discussion of the latest orientations and techniques used in crime policy both in Denmark and abroad.

The book concludes with a chapter that summarizes and discusses the most important results of the project. Particular attention is paid to findings that differ from those obtained in previous research, differences examined for both methodological and cultural explanations. This chapter also contains reflections on what criminal career research has to offer to our understanding of crime, and its challenges to criminological theory.

Finally, the results from various studies on incapacitation, deterrence, and rehabilitation are discussed from both methodological and policy-oriented perspectives.

This study is based solely on information about crime, gender, age, and social status. Such a narrow spectrum of variables might be assumed to limit considerably the possibilities for analysis. This is far from the case. Almost every analysis resulted in more questions than answers, and often cried out for additional subanalyses, all of which could be undertaken with the available data. The possibilities for differentiation seemed infinite.

Examinations of the main questions are, of necessity, prioritized in this study. Although various substudies are undertaken, specific analyses of the conditions of special groups are excluded.

This study attempts to paint a rich picture of the criminal career as it unfolds in Denmark today. The possibilities for conducting such research do not, however, cease with the conclusion of this particular work. Other scientists are encouraged to pick up where this analysis leaves off.

Summary

This study aims to provide basic knowledge concerning the patterns and development of crime on an individual level. Onset, desistance, and duration of the individual criminal career are of primary interest. The nature of individual crime frequencies, as well as specialization and escalation, are also explored, as are the effects of penal sanctions on altering such patterns via deterrence and incapacitation. Besides adding Scandinavian data to a heretofore largely Anglo-American debate, this study hopes to present a readable literature to the layman, thus helping to counteract popular myths concerning crime and criminality.

Compared to previous research, the study is based on a remarkably large sample, and on data of a comparatively higher quality. Given these facts, the current study is well suited for the analysis of low baserate phenomena, even in regard to subgroup analyses.