Gender and Crime

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Abstract
Beginning with the last review of gender and crime that appeared in the Annual Review of Sociology (1996), I examine the developments in the more traditional approaches to this subject (the gender ratio problem and the problem of theoretical generalization), life course research, and feminist research (gendered pathways, gendered crime, and gendered lives). This review highlights important insights that have emerged in this work on gender and crime, and it considers how this work might be further enriched by drawing on sociological theories that can address how gendered lives shape the impetus and opportunities for offending. This includes work on the context of offending, the learning and expression of emotions, and identity theory.
INTRODUCTION

Almost two decades ago, Steffensmeier & Allan (1996) summarized the state of research on gender and crime for the Annual Review of Sociology. Their review focused heavily on the gender gap in crime and the problems inherent in the gender equality or liberation hypothesis generated in the 1970s to explain the rise in female offending (Adler 1975, Simon 1975). They also highlighted findings they thought would be important for scholars in this field. For example, they noted that many mainstream criminological theories’ relevance for explaining female offending is more salient in studies of minor offending than serious offending. They also noted that the context of female offending, which could explain why women’s offenses often involve relational concerns, was rarely addressed. Focusing on these and other concerns that they identified in the research, they put forth a “gendered theory of crime.”

As I show in this review, developments in the field of gender and crime suggest that at least three aspects of their gendered theory of crime were prescient: (a) gendered pathways to crime; (b) the importance of the contexts in which males and females offend; and (c) how the organization of gender deters or shapes crime by women and encourages it by men. The purpose of this review is not to rehash the scholarly work that Steffensmeier & Allan (1996) reviewed, which was vast then and has continued to proliferate. Rather, it is to examine and critically evaluate research on gender and crime that has been published since their review, much of which has followed from the areas they identified as important to developing a gendered theory of crime. It is perhaps more common for reviews of gender and crime, or women and crime, to devote considerable attention to assessing sex-based trends in crime derived from the Uniform Crime Reports, the National Crime Victimization Survey, and various longitudinal studies of youth who provide annual self-reports of their offending. I discuss sex-based trends in offending only in the context of my assessment of how this area of research has grown relative to other areas in the study of gender and crime; that is, I treat these data as part of the larger question of what advances have been made in the research on gender and crime.

My approach to assessing developments in this field was as follows: I extracted articles on women and crime or gender and crime from 25 journals and 2 annual reviews, starting with the year Steffensmeier & Allan published their review and concluding in 2011 (1996–2011). I grouped the articles according to the most common approaches to studying women and crime prior to 1996 and the most common themes that have appeared in feminist research in criminology since that time. Daly & Chesney-Lind (1988) identified a twofold focus in the early research on women and crime: (a) the gender gap or gender ratio problem, which attempts to explain the sex difference in offending rates, and (b) the generalizability problem, which examines whether the same theoretical constructs can be used to explain male and female offending. More recent developments in feminist criminology focus on “gendered pathways”

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offending (what factors lead men and women to initiate and to continue offending), “gendered crime” (the specific contexts and qualities of female and male offending), and “gendered lives” (how gender shapes the lives of women and men in ways that either protect against or facilitate offending) (Daly 1998). Research on gender and crime also attends to more mainstream work in the area of life course criminology, penology (including prison programs), and re-entry and recidivism. Of course, my allocation of articles into these categories was subjective, and, as with any system of classification, some studies cross over into multiple categories. Nevertheless, I endeavored to classify the articles according to the primary focus of the scholarly research, or what the author(s) identified as their main research question(s). Work on juvenile offenders is included, but research that focuses solely on the victimization of women (e.g., domestic violence, sexual assault) is not included.4

I first present the results of this empirical assessment of how the field of gender and crime has grown since 1996. I then turn to assess what we have learned from these various areas of research. Owing to space limitations and to my focus on theoretical contributions, I do not review research that focuses primarily on the consequences of crime—prison, prison programming, and recidivism—unless it is specifically linked to a theoretical development in a particular area. Finally, on the basis of this review, I suggest what factors might be important to advancing not only our understanding of gender and crime but more generally our theories of crime and criminality.

ASSESSING A NEW COHORT OF STUDIES ON GENDER AND CRIME

Collectively, I found 273 articles on the topic of gender and crime. As can be seen in Figure 1, most of these fell into the area of feminist criminology (95 articles and 35% of the research). Although the traditional questions that guided

Figure 1
Feminist research, 1996–2011. In the field of gendered crime, there is a subset of work on the processing of female offenders in the criminal justice system (20 out of 46 articles). The same holds true for the field of gendered lives and the subset of intersectionality (17 out of 31 articles). These subsets are highlighted in light blue.

Figure 2 illustrates how these specific areas of feminist criminology are developing. I included articles that addressed the processing of female offenders as a subset of gendered crime because what happens to men and women in adjudication and sentencing can have substantial effects on their subsequent offending lives.

I also included work on intersectionality as a subset of the gendered lives category. Intersectionality research explicitly attends to the complexity of women’s lives and the ways in which they are shaped not only by gender but also, simultaneously, by other systems of power—most notably race and class. Among these domains of feminist research, the work on gendered crime is most pronounced; including the work on the processing of offenders, it represents one-half of the scholarship in feminist criminology. Gendered lives (and the corollary work on intersectionality) comprise almost one-third of this research. Studies of pathways to offending appears to be relatively sparse, representing only about one-fifth of the feminist research. We turn now to the contributions that have emerged both from traditional work on gender and crime and from contemporary directions that have been put forth.

The Gender Gap or the Gender Ratio Problem

Males have long dominated crime statistics, and in absolute terms they still do. However, reminiscent of the 1970s when scholars began to question whether women were making inroads into the male-dominated arena of crime (Adler 1975), some scholars continue to focus on the question of whether, and if so how, the sex distribution of crime has changed. However, unlike their predecessors who charted changes in female property offending, scholars today focus much of their research on violent crime. Official arrest data (Uniform Crime Reports) suggest that female violence is increasing and the gender gap may be closing, although this convergence depends on the specific offenses and time periods examined (see, e.g., O’Brien 1999, Steffensmeier et al. 2006). Because evidence of a gender convergence in violent crime is derived primarily from official arrest data, some scholars turned to victimization and self-report data to assess the reliability of these trends. Finding no evidence of a convergence in the gender gap in violent crime in these data, they concluded that changes in enforcement patterns, rather than changes in women’s behavior, are driving the convergence (Steffensmeier et al. 2005, Schwartz & Rookey 2008, Feld 2009). Others, however, argue that victimization data do provide evidence of a decline in the gender gap in violent crime but that it is driven not by
greater rates of female offending (as reported by victims) but by greater declines in male offending relative to female offending (Lauritsen et al. 2009, Rennison 2009).

Some insights into both the absolute sex differences in crime and the sex-based differences in declining rates of offending may be found in work that focuses on whether middle-range crime theories can account for these sex-based disparities. First, as to the absolute differences, a growing body of research emanating from tests of general strain theory (GST; Agnew 1992) provides some evidence that emotions are gendered in ways that may suppress female offending or aggravate male offending. GST posits that strain produces negative emotions that in turn fuel delinquency. Tests of this theory have shown that males and females who are exposed to strain react with both anger and other emotions (guilt and depression), but how the combined effects of these emotions are displayed results in more delinquency among males than females (Broidy & Agnew 1997, De Coster & Zito 2010). A second line of research, emanating from learning theory, focuses on the most proximal cause of offending—delinquent peers—to explain the gender gap in offending. Although early research repeatedly found that males have greater exposure to delinquent peers than do females and that such exposure has a greater effect on them than on females (Heimer & De Coster 1999, Liu & Kaplan 1999), a more recent study has shown that this relationship is conditioned by neighborhood context. Neighborhood disadvantage increases exposure to peer violence for both sexes, but in this disadvantaged context it seems to have a stronger impact on girls’ violence because females have more intimate peer relationships and peers are more influential when they are intimate (Zimmerman & Messner 2010). This research reminds us that we must be sensitive to the ways in which local contexts impact sex-based patterns in offending. Third, and particularly relevant to the sex-based declines in offending rates, is the research emanating from power control theory. Power control theory draws attention to the different gender schemas that parents provide for their children as a result of their power in the workplace. The theory initially focused on explaining the effects of maternal workplace authority on girls’ propensity for risk taking and delinquency (Hagan et al. 1987), but more recently it has shifted attention to the effect of this maternal role on boys’ propensity for delinquency. Here we find that when women have more workplace authority and personal agency their sons adopt more critical views of traditional gender schemas, and delinquency among these boys is more likely to be discouraged (McCarthy et al. 1999, Hagan et al. 2004).

Generalizability
Can we use the same theoretical constructions to explain male and female offending or do we need to derive separate theories? Scholars who have tried to answer this question have approached it in three different ways. First, some work with multiple middle-range theories examines what are considered to be core conceptions from each theory (e.g., parental attachment in control theory or delinquent peers in the case of differential association theory). The bulk of this research suggests that although there are level differences in male and female offending, the causal mechanisms driving the offending behaviors are generally gender neutral (Fleming et al. 2002, Bell 2009, Faris & Felmlie 2011).

A second approach focuses on the generalizability of a specific theory. Over the past decade, GST and, to a lesser extent, Gottfredson & Hirschi’s (1990) self-control theory have been the most frequently tested theories. From a feminist perspective, both theories are conceptual hybrids, as they address the gender gap in crime while trying to determine whether gender-neutral mechanisms drive offending. For example, Broidy & Agnew’s (1997) exposition of GST laid out several hypotheses that generated considerable research. Succinctly, they asked whether there are differences in the types of strains males and females experience and in their emotional responses to these
strains. Tests of these hypotheses produced mixed results. When the strain-crime relationship is measured with the presence only of adverse life events, the relationship holds for general delinquency regardless of the respondent’s gender (Agniew & Brezina 1997, Mazerolle 1998). However, when emotional responses to negative life events are modeled as mediating variables, both emotional and behavioral responses to strain vary significantly by gender (Piquero & Sealock 2004, Jang 2007, Kaufman 2009). Tests of the generalizability of Gottfredson & Hirschi’s (1990) theory of social control also produced mixed findings. The theory of self-control posits that crime occurs when individuals have low self-control and the opportunity to offend. Although results vary somewhat depending on the measures of self-control and antisocial behavior, there is evidence of gender invariance in the effects of low self-control on criminal offending (Tittle et al. 2003, Shekarkhar & Gibson 2011). However, how self-control interacts with opportunities for offending may differ by gender (Burton et al. 1998, Higgins & Tewksbury 2006).

A final group of research focuses on aggregate level data and examines whether the same structural covariates explain rates of male and female offending. This research suggests that structural disadvantage (poverty, income inequality, joblessness, female-headed households, and percent Black) and gender-specific measures of unemployment and marriage-to-divorce ratios have largely the same effects, albeit with differing magnitudes, on male and female crime rates (Steffensmeier & Haynie 2000, Lo & Zhong 2006).

Do we need separate theories to explain male and female offending? The research suggests that some formative experiences that are conducive to crime (e.g., poor parental relationships, low self-control, delinquent peers, economic disadvantage) are gender invariant but that the emotional mediators of these experiences and the opportunities for offending may not be. This underscores not only the sociological axiom that the display of emotions are both learned and gendered (Hochschild 1979) but also the importance of understanding the context of gendered lives for the development of criminological theory.

Life Course

Relatively few scholars focus on the ways gender shapes patterns of offending across the life course. Nevertheless, research in this vein that has been attentive to gender has followed the mainstream developments on male offending by (a) examining criminal career trajectories and (b) extending and elaborating on Sampson & Laub’s (1993) age-graded theory of informal social control.

The question of whether there are significant differences in the criminal careers of males and females is difficult to answer because relatively few investigations have been undertaken and there is considerable diversity among the data sets used for this type of investigation. Results from at least three data sets (Dunedin Birth Cohort Study, the Boricua Youth Study–Puerto Rican youth in the Bronx and San Juan, and the Criminal Career and Life Course Study in the Netherlands) suggest that the number of groups and the patterns of trajectories (e.g., low-, medium-, and high-frequency offenders) are similar for males and females, although there is some variability in the degree to which women are as prevalent as men among high-rate offenders (Piquero et al. 2005, Block et al. 2010, Jennings et al. 2010). An important predictor of these trajectories is thought to be the age at which an individual begins offending, with, as Moffitt (1993) argues, an early age of onset predicting “life course persistent” offending. There is no clear evidence that an early onset of offending (usually operationalized as before age 14) has the same effect on male and female trajectories of offending; some scholars find that an early onset predicts high and diverse rates of offending in the teens and into early adulthood regardless of sex (Mazerolle et al. 2000, Odgers et al. 2008), whereas others find this prediction holds only for males (Piquero & Chung 2001, D’Unger et al. 2002). But few studies have
investigated how an adult onset of offending might influence subsequent criminal trajectories. Although Moffitt and colleagues (2001, pp. 84–85) maintain that adult onset cannot be measured with certainty and that it is extremely rare, there is mounting evidence that women, on average, have a much later offending onset than men (Eggleston & Laub 2002, Block et al. 2010). This finding has important theoretical implications as it contradicts the notion that stable traits that shape offending probabilities are formed well before adulthood (Gottfredson & Hirschi 1990, Moffitt 1993). Rather, as Sampson & Laub (1993) argue, it suggests that experiences in adult life have a substantial impact on offending probabilities even when such stable traits are taken into account.

Sampson & Laub’s (1993) age-graded theory of informal social control examines the factors that predict continuity and change in offending over the life course. Using the Gluecks’ data—a sample of white male offenders who matured into adults in the 1950s—they found that marital attachment and job stability were both critical determinants of desistance from crime in adulthood, but they emphasized that it was the quality of these experiences that mattered. Their analyses highlight the importance of solid jobs and so-called good marriages, which require investments of time and energy, in pushing offenders toward desistance (Laub & Sampson 2003). Questioning the utility of this finding for females and minorities who came of age at the end of the twentieth century, a number of scholars have demonstrated the importance of bringing gender to bear on this theory. Particularly notable is the research of Giordano et al. (2002). On the basis of a longitudinal study of serious male and female delinquents first incarcerated in the 1980s, they found that neither marital attachment nor employment was a significant predictor of adult desistance from crime for either sex. Others, focusing only on marriage, have found that it is beneficial for men but has no crime-reducing potential for women (King et al. 2007, Bersani et al. 2009; significant gender differences have also been found in other predictors of desistance such as education, employment, and illegal drug use, e.g., Uggen & Kruttschnitt 1998, Simons et al. 2002). The absence of the marriage-desistance relationship among women is thought to be related to women’s greater likelihood (compared with men) of marrying another offender, or, as some put it, women offenders have little chance of “marrying up” (King et al. 2007, p. 55). This hypothesis is consistent with the literature on assortative mating among offenders and its influence on offending stability across the life course (Simons et al. 2002). Furthermore, because the criminogenic effects of having an antisocial partner are amplified by marital happiness among both male and female offenders (Giordano et al. 2007), desistance may rely less on the quality of a marriage or partnership than on the prosocial qualities of one’s partner.

FEMINIST CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE STUDY OF GENDER AND CRIME

In 1998, Daly posited that in order to move beyond mere analyses of the gender gap in crime and advance theoretical development on gender differences in offending, we need to unpack the biographical, contextual, and structural factors that affect women’s (and men’s) offending. Directing attention to these areas, as Steffensmeier & Allan (1996) did in their gendered theory of crime, produced a conceptual scheme that focuses on gendered pathways to lawbreaking, gendered crime, and gendered lives.

Gendered Pathways to Offending

Research on gendered pathways to offending considers the factors that influence the initiation (and the termination) of male and female offending and the ways in which they might be gendered. Daly’s (1992) qualitative analysis of pre-sentence reports on 40 women and 40 men in felony court is commonly recognized as the most important conceptual formulation of this approach to studying crime. Mapping the life experiences that lead to offending, she
documented five pathways for women: (a) “street women” were severely abused in childhood and subsequently turned to the streets, engaging in various hustles to survive; (b) “harmed and harming women” were also abused and had a chaotic family life, which led to abusing drugs and alcohol; (c) “drug-connected women” used or sold drugs in connection with family or partners, but they were not addicted to drugs and did not have extensive criminal histories; (d) “battered women” were in violent relationships and their criminal activities consisted of striking back at abusive partners; and (e) “other women” had no difficult family histories and their crimes were economically motivated. 3 Unfortunately, subsequent research on this topic has not been as informative. Although childhood maltreatment and sexual abuse, family chaos, poverty, school failure, and alcohol and substance abuse problems have all been touted as critical factors in females’ pathways to offending and, in some cases, in their pathways to recidivism (Salisbury & Van Voorhis 2009), there is no evidence that these factors are in fact gendered, given that males are routinely left out of the studies (see, e.g., Bloom et al. 2003, Cook et al. 2005, Green et al. 2005). When males’ experiences are systematically compared with those of females, either the effects of abuse, and many of the other predictors of serious juvenile offending, do not vary significantly by sex of the offender (Belknap & Holsinger 2006, Johansson & Kempf-Leonard 2009, Topitzers et al. 2011) or the variations are related to the extent and timing of the life trauma rather than to its presence or absence (Leigey & Reed 2010). Although this comports with the more general finding of gender overlap in the risk factors for delinquency (Moffitt et al. 2001, Zahn et al. 2010), some evidence of a gendered pathway to crime can be found in prospective studies of the association between child maltreatment and adult crime and drug use (Wilson & Widom 2009, Topitzers et al. 2011). These studies suggest that how and when the effects of child abuse are manifest in criminal offending or illicit drug use may depend on the gendering of other aspects of the life course and the development of more generalized behavioral problems that may include problems in school, homelessness, and prostitution.

The pathways concept also draws attention to social contexts that are relevant to the initiation of offending and the ways in which these might be gendered, but relatively little work of this type has been undertaken. A notable exception is Davis’s (2007) investigation of why a sizeable number of female status offenders have ended up in juvenile institutions since the passage of the 1974 Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act aimed at diverting status offenders from the justice system. Davis’s participant observation study of girls detained and released from a facility housing minor offenders reveals a process of relabeling status offenses that arose in the context of parental conflicts. These girls were predominantly from African American and Latino families that had few resources for addressing their family problems other than calling the police. Once in the juvenile justice system, minor acts of disobedience against parents were treated as probation violations, which caused the offenders to become further enmeshed in the justice system. In unraveling how social disadvantage, in combination with traditional gender schemes about the appropriate behavior for adolescent females, facilitates entry into the juvenile justice system, Davis gives us a nuanced understanding of how particular social contexts shape offending trajectories and are gendered.

Gendered Crime

Research on gendered crime is focused on the situational contexts and qualities of criminal activity, drawing attention to both the contexts
favorable to and the environments that impede female offending. This area of research has grown dramatically over the past 15 years in part because of criminologists’ increasing concern with the situational correlates of crime. Although this research includes contributions by both mainstream and feminist criminologists, here I draw particular attention to the work by feminists who consider how women maneuver in the gender-stratified arena of crime and how they “do gender” in the process of committing crimes (see, e.g., Messerschmidt 1993, Miller 1998). Such work draws attention to the fluidity of gender identities rather than to the view that they are firmly grounded in particular social structures or social roles.

Research on women’s involvement in drug sales/distribution, gangs, and violent crime has been particularly prolific and points to a number of important findings. First, there appears to be considerable gender overlap in the motivations—control, respect, revenge, and economic survival—for engaging in these offenses (Morgan & Joe 1997, Miller 1998, Esbensen et al. 1999, Kruttschnitt & Carbone-Lopez 2006). Second, if the motivations of male and female offenders are similar, are their actions in the commission of the crimes the same? The answer may depend on the particular skills involved in the crime and its gender composition. There is no evidence that women are making inroads in the sales and distribution of crack cocaine (Dunlap et al. 1997), but there is such evidence in methamphetamine sales, human trafficking, and shoplifting (Morgan & Joe 1997, Zhang et al. 2007, Caputo & King 2011). These are all crimes in which women have been able to exert their own business acumen or establish a need for services and skills that are perceived to be stratified by gender (i.e., in accordance with gender stereotypes). They are also crimes that are less likely to be dominated by men—a situation that encourages a blurring of prevailing notions of masculinity and femininity and gender-stratified offending rates (Peterson et al. 2001). Third, and related, gendered expectations about women’s activities still prevail when it comes to their use of violence (Esbensen et al. 1999, Miller & Decker 2001). In the context of drug sales and gangs, women report deploying violence when they need to but preferring to avert it by drawing on other resources and skills such as “acting bad,” cultivating a trusted reputation, and confining connections to family members and specific neighborhoods (Denton & O’Malley 1999, Laidler & Hunt 2001). Additionally, by carefully selecting their targets (females) and relying on gender stereotypes (e.g., men’s reluctance to use violence against women), they are able to effectively reduce their exposure to violence, particularly in male-dominated arenas such as robbery and retaliatory violence (Miller 1998, Mullins et al. 2004). What these studies show, then, is the fluidity of gender roles, as women and men reaffirm them in some contexts and situations and transcend them in others.

Research on the gendering of adult crime within the criminal justice system (processing) has been somewhat less informative. At a minimum, it counsels us that one of the main reasons male and female offenders are sanctioned differently is because of the differences in the nature and extent of their crimes and criminal histories (see Daly & Tonry 1997 for a review of this literature). In its most progressive form, this research points to the gendered assumptions and statuses that may have more subtle influence on courtroom decisions (see, e.g., Thompson 2010). One such status thought to have favored female offenders is their responsibilities for dependent children. With the invocation of determinate sentencing, it was assumed that women would lose this penalty discount. Evidence suggests both that the imposition of sentencing guidelines had little effect on women’s sentences and that the presumed mitigating effects of children on their sentences may be influenced more by regional norms than

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6A notable exception may be white-collar offenses where men are more likely to report that their offenses were in fact “acceptable business practices” and women were more likely to indicate that their crimes were motivated by economic necessity (Klenowski et al. 2011).
by widespread judicial norms (Koons-Witt 2002, Griffin & Wooldredge 2006).

Empirical work on juvenile offenders is increasingly moving to the front end of the criminal justice system, focusing on questions of how gender influences arrest and charging decisions rather than sentencing outcomes. In a creative use of Emerson’s (1983) notion that individual cases are influenced by the stream of cases an agency handles, McCluskey et al. (2003) found that increases in sex crimes (1989–1999), which produced more organizational concern about the victimization of girls, were related to increases in arrests of girls for status offenses. Others have also found an increased willingness to control young female offenders’ behaviors, but it appears to have shifted from controlling their sexuality to controlling their aggression; the number of girls (especially black girls) charged with assault increased substantially over the last two decades of the twentieth century (Stevens et al. 2011). At the back end of the system, we find probation officers still relying on gendered scripts of girls who are described not as criminally dangerous but as needy victims (Mallicoat 2007) (such appellations, of course, also have a long and continuing history with adult female offenders; see, e.g., Turnbull & Hannah-Moffat 2009). The experiences of delinquent girls who are taken out of their communities and subjected to group homes or placed on probation may be quite variable, however. Casting doubt on the homogeneous picture some feminists paint of state-sponsored approaches to young female offenders, Haney (1996) provides a vivid account of two disparate views of and tactics for addressing these girls’ problems: One attacks private patriarchy (men) and the other public patriarchy (welfare). In so doing, she draws our attention back to the importance of understanding how different contexts can fundamentally alter the experiences and subsequent lives of female offenders.

**Gendered Lives**

Research in this tradition draws attention to gendered experiences in social life that have relevance for, but may not be directly linked to, crime. As such, an important component of this work, but one that is underdeveloped, is the scholarship on intersectionality. Because research on gendered lives systematically considers the familial and social experiences of women and men that either facilitate or protect against offending, it can be seen as overlapping with the work on gendered crime. Nevertheless, at its best, this research offers considerable insight into the individual and structural experiences that may shape gender differences in offending and in official reactions to offenders. Here I draw attention to studies that are particularly illustrative of this perspective and to the range of approaches used to investigate intersectionality.

Botcher (2001) conceptualized gender as an active social process consistent with Giddens (1984) and a feminist approach to “doing gender” (e.g., West & Zimmerman 1987). To examine how gender practices and processes facilitate or inhibit delinquency, she interviewed a group of high-risk youth (siblings of incarcerated youth), using their activities as the unit of analysis. Botcher found that the activities assigned to girls—child care and other parental responsibilities—and the male domination of most adolescent activities effectively curtailed girls’ opportunities for engaging in delinquent activities (see also Miller 2007). From this perspective, she argues, crime is not a resource for doing masculinity, as Messerschmidt (1993) suggests, but instead “it becomes such a resource through the practice of gender” (Botcher 2001, p. 925; Messerschmidt 1993 argued that although structures define gender, action reproduces it and crime is one way of reproducing masculinity).

Other scholars also draw attention to the related concept, and importance, of male-dominated networks and how women negotiate these networks—via their sexuality or by becoming accomplices—to engage in offending (Maher & Daly 1996, Mullins & Wright 2003). Less researched but equally interesting are the results from studies that examine how gender alters taken-for-granted social processes when
females are able to dominate a peer network. The effect is to reduce property offending among both females and males or to exert some influence over the activities of males (McCarthy et al. 2004). This suggests that in particular contexts the activities and norms of females, which are presumed to have been developed in the home and extended to friends, may be as important as, or more important than, males for determining the likelihood of offending. Whether this finding can be extended to other types of crime and different racial groups remains an important area for future research.

Research on intersectionality is most pronounced in studies on the ways in which racialized gender expectations shape the interactions that youth and adults have with the criminal justice system. For example, although there is evidence that the police response to black youth is conditioned by gender—such that males are more frequently stopped and harassed than females (Brunson & Miller 2006)—this disadvantage may not apply once they get to the juvenile court. Instead, the court appears to put considerable weight on the family status of white youth, and especially of white females, who appear to be perceived as being particularly vulnerable if they come from single-parent households (Leiber & Mack 2003). The hypothesized focal concerns of the court—protection of the community, blameworthiness, and the consequences of removing an offender from his/her family and community (Steffensmeier 1980)—have also been linked to racialized gender expectations. Adult female offenders, regardless of race, seem to be deemed less blameworthy or dangerous than male offenders, especially black and Hispanic male offenders (Spohn & Spears 1997, Steffensmeier & Demuth 2006, Doerner & Demuth 2010).

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED AND WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

In summarizing the research on gender and crime that they had reviewed, Steffensmeier & Allan (1996) raised a number of issues and questions for future research. Here, I briefly note advances made since their review as well as remaining gaps in the study of gender and crime. I close by considering some of the challenges scholars in this field face today.

First, there is growing evidence that many (but not all) of the central theoretical correlates of crime (poor parenting, low self-control, delinquent peers, and economic disadvantage) are gender invariant but that the mediators of these experiences, which may include opportunities for reacting to these stressors, may not be. Second, and consonant with this finding, some of the factors that were thought to be uniquely important to female offending (e.g., child maltreatment, substance abuse, and mental health problems) may not be (Moffitt et al. 2001, Johansson & Kempf-Leonard 2009, Zahn et al. 2010). However, whether gender moderates the relationship between victimization and crime remains unclear. Examining the role of adolescent and adult victimization in the onset of offending and in the apparent lagged effect of child abuse on adult female offending (see, e.g., Cernkovich et al. 2008, Topitzers et al. 2011) might explicate some of the observed gender variations in age of onset, including adult-onset offending. Third, studies of female criminal careers have grown tremendously, producing increasing evidence of a similar range of offending trajectories (low-, medium-, and high-frequency offenders) for both males and females. Fourth, the development of a more gendered life course perspective on offending (cf. Sampson & Laub 1993) has shed light on how the process of desistance varies for men and women and on how it is influenced by the historical context in which offenders live out their lives (Giordano et al. 2002, 2007). Finally, we have also discovered that the motivations for enlisting in gangs, selling drugs, and even committing some violent crimes are gender
neutral, but the activities of men and women who engage in these offenses can vary depending on the gender composition of the offense and the fluidity of gender roles in particular contexts. Such variation may also depend on the interaction of gender with other dimensions of power such as race and class (Kruttschnitt & Carbone-Lopez 2006), but this is an area of scholarship that remains woefully underdeveloped (see Burgess-Proctor 2006, 2013).

Steffensmeier & Allan (1996, p. 483) also drew attention to what they called the “gender-related conditions of life.” Succinctly, they argued that the principal shortcoming of traditional theories of crime is their failure to consider how the gendering of social life contributes to the variations we observe in the criminality of men and women. Today, there is a growing, albeit uneven, body of work on the differences in the lives of women and men. Feminist criminologists have made gendered lives a priority area of research along with “pathways” and gendered crime, but they have not clearly demonstrated that these are each unique areas of inquiry. Gendered lives shape women’s pathways into and out of offending and they have a substantial influence on the nature and extent of female offending (or gendered crime). Clearly, then, although research on gendered lives holds considerable theoretical promise for advancing our understanding of sex differences (and similarities) in crime, it will need to be more fully developed. This will require drawing more directly on sociological insights that can contribute to a deeper understanding of how structural contexts, socialization practices, and identity salience coalesce to produce differences in the experiences of women and men that have implications for involvement in crime. Little work of this type exists, but notable and important examples have appeared in this review not only from the work on gendered lives but also from mainstream approaches to the subject of gender and crime (gender gap, generalizability, and life course research). Here I draw attention to a few of these findings, noting their natural affiliations with these sociological frames.

We have long known that deviant peers are the most proximal cause of delinquency, but until recently little was known about how neighborhood context would affect this association. As discussed in this review, in extremely disadvantaged neighborhoods peer group experiences appear to be more intense and particularly deleterious for girls (Zimmerman & Messner 2010). But how is this effect altered by the sex composition of the peer group? We know that in the context of high school students (some of whom reported gang affiliations) and street youth, sex-integrated peer groups can serve to dampen or heighten offending depending on their composition (see, e.g., Peterson et al. 2001, McCarthy et al. 2004), but we do not know whether these effects would extend to youth residing in high-crime, economically disadvantaged contexts. Such disadvantaged contexts also figure strongly in shaping females’ probabilities of being funneled into the criminal justice system. A breakdown of parental controls in the context both of traditional gendered expectations for behavior and of the few available resources for reinforcing these expectations results in increasing vulnerability to formal sanctioning for girls, especially minority girls (Davis 2007). Collectively, these findings remind us that girls’ (and boys’) experiences have to be contextualized. Just as individuals are shaped by their particular gender, race, and social class configuration, so also are they shaped by the contexts in which they live out their lives.

Although neighborhoods leave their own imprint on youth, the family—a mainstay of criminological research—has long been accorded the first and primary role in socializing males and females. We have seen that the ways in which activities are gendered in this socialization process are critical for understanding girls’ opportunities for engaging in delinquency (Bottcher 2001), and we have also seen, more generally, that the gender schemas that parents provide for boys and girls significantly influence their perspectives on offending (McCarthy et al. 1999). This latter body of research deserves far more attention, and it should
be directed toward youth growing up in single-parent, severely disadvantaged households. In households where girls’ and boys’ mothers are offending, or where they have no stable male parental figure, what kind of a gender schema is imprinted on the youth? In addition to the family, school also plays a role in gender socialization through the gender-differentiated application of normative expectations and control (Thorne 1993). Yet relatively few scholars have examined gendered lives in the context of school socialization (see, e.g., Booth et al. 2008, Payne 2009). If we assume that gendered controls established early on in the family are reinforced in the school environment, we would do well to pay more attention to the gendered socialization processes in this environment.

Finally, we have also seen findings in this review that are ripe for cross-fertilization with sociological research on identity salience. Both gender-typical and -atypical behaviors emerge in different crime situations that are often contextualized by the sex composition of a particular criminal activity. In highly gender-structured offending activities, some women use their feminine traits, but others adopt masculine attitudes, as resources to accomplish their goals (Miller 1998, Miller & Decker 2001). This fluidity of gender roles points to the importance of expanding this research in the context of identity theory that looks to our multiple identities (or our ability to cross gender scripts) and links them to roles and behaviors that are situationally meaningful (Stryker & Burke 2000). Further, because identity theory also considers the social structures in which identities exist and are played out, it facilitates research on serious, as well as more minor, offenders and the ways that situations of disadvantage impact the offending careers of racially diverse groups of males and females.

Another component of socialization integral to both family and school experiences, and to furthering our understanding of gendered lives, is the learning of emotions. Despite sociologists’ growing interest in emotions, this area is not well developed in criminology. Tests of GST indicate considerable gender variation in emotional responses to negative life events, but virtually all of this research focuses on negative emotions (anger, depression, anxiety) as a catalyst for offending. Far less research has considered how the development of positive emotions such as empathy and caring can inhibit offending (see, e.g., Broidy et al. 2003). Although this is not a new point (Simpson 1989, Steffensmeier & Allan 1996), its salience for furthering our understanding of gendered lives cannot be underestimated. Recent additions to life course theory indicate that emotions have a substantial impact on trajectories of offending, and this is especially true for disadvantaged youth whose emotional lives are central to their identities, given that they lack many of the skills and attributes found among middle-class youth whose identities are tied to college and employment opportunities (Hagan & Foster 2003, Giordano et al. 2007). What emotions girls and boys experience, and how they perform these emotions (Hochschild 1979), may then be critical to furthering our understanding of how the gendering of social life affects propensities to offend.

Over the past two decades, we have gained numerous important insights into the world of gender and crime. Although these insights have flowed from a range of criminological perspectives, the development of the concept of gendered lives (Daly 1998, p. 98) and the work that is contributing to this line of scholarship will have an enormous payoff. This research can expand our understanding of the structural, social, and interpersonal factors that affect the probability of offending for both males and females. In so doing, it will enrich all theoretical developments in criminology, not just the feminist perspective.

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