
AN ANALYSIS OF MARK RENTON AND HIS DRUG ADDICTION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF LIFE-COURSE CRIMINOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Life-course criminology involves developmental studies in criminology, the focus of which is on the psychological factors that influence the onset and persistence of criminal behaviour. This method of study analyses how changes in social arrangements, like education, employment or marriage could lead to changes in offending. This paper studies the life of Mark Renton, the protagonist of the movie *Trainspotting*, and his drug addiction using life-course criminology approach. Different stages of his substance abuse has been observed and analysed such as the onset, acceleration, desistance, relapse, cessation and recovery. In addition, the influence of drug addiction on Mark Renton's offending behaviour has also been looked into.

1. Introduction

Many people experiment with drugs and then abstain from it; but some become frequent users, and few of them turn out to be dependant users, even problematic.¹ One of the popular approach to analyse and explain this change in behaviour over time would be the life-course criminology perspective which examines the order and duration of life events and their consequences,² the development of anti-social behaviour and the risk and protective factors at different ages.³ In simple terms, it is the study from the womb to tomb. Within-individual analysis is involved while studying the effects of life events on development⁴ as this explains better the changes in behaviour of the particular person over time.

This approach is adopted in this paper which examines the life of Mark Renton from the film – *Trainspotting*. The life-course of drug use involves the onset, acceleration, relapse, and cessation stages separated by changes or life events.⁵ This paper analysis Renton's addiction through these different stages and examines which life events have influenced his drug abuse and in what way. The popular age-crime curve shows two patterns of offending – how anti-social behaviour could gradually start, peak during late adolescence and fade away with age, known as the adolescent limited pattern; and anti-social behaviour starting at an early age and persisting throughout life, known as life-course-persistent.⁶ Although similar pattern can be observed in Renton, analysis of his life will show that these patterns do not apply as they have been established, and there are also limitations to analysing this prediction due to the short span of life depicted in the film.

2. Mark Renton's drug addiction

The movie *Trainspotting* is silent about the age of Renton and also about the span of time that passes by. Also, what is shown is only a short period of his life and there are no details about his childhood or about the later part of his life. This limits the scope of a very detailed analysis with respect to the life-course perspective. In spite of limited period depicted, Renton

¹ Kevin Chen and Denise B Kandel, 'The Natural History of Drug Use from Adolescence to the Mid-Thirties in a General Population Sample' (1995) 85 *American Journal of Public Health*.

² Yih-Ing Hser, Douglas Longshore and M Douglas Anglin, 'The Life Course Perspective on Drug Use' (2007) 41 515.

³ David P Farrington, 'Life-Course and Developmental Theories in Criminology' (2010) 48 *The Sage Handbook of Criminological Theory* 249.

⁴ *ibid*.

⁵ Hser, Longshore and Anglin (n 2).

⁶ Terrie E Moffitt, 'Adolescence-Limited and Life-Course-Persistent Antisocial Behavior: A Developmental Taxonomy' (1993) 100 *Psychological Review* 674.

experiences different stages in his drug addiction.

Initially, Renton is seen spending most of his time with his friends. He often injects heroin along with two friends just for the pleasure of it and also to take away all worries. He decides to stop heroin although he continues to use alcohol and amphetamine. He faces episodes of desistance and relapses and treatment does not seem effective. He engages in shoplifting and theft to fund his drugs. Finally, his parents help him get over his addiction but he faces depression and boredom. His life changes for the better when he goes to London, is employed and is away from his friends.

3. Onset and acceleration

Most substance abuse – cigarettes, alcohol and drugs begin around adolescence, and this early initiation or onset is the best predictor of future drug use and dependence.⁷ With an early initiation, the drug abuse peaks during late teenage and early adulthood, while the onset of drug abuse after 25 years of age is usually limited.⁸ In this case, it is unknown as to when the use of drugs were initiated by Renton but he is depicted as a young adult and phase of life shown seems to be the peak period which corresponds to the literature.

After several longitudinal studies, some of the risk factors for the early onset of drug use have been identified. Some of them are individual factors such as impulsiveness, low intelligence; family factors like poor parental supervision, inconsistent discipline; socio-economic factors like low income but the more befitting factor in the case of Renton would be peer factors⁹ – two of his four friends also indulge in drug abuse but the film is silent on whether this actually led to the initiation of drug use in Renton. However, it is clear that peer factor led to the acceleration of drug use since they always used it together and they also had easy availability from their friend and supplier, Swanney, which leads to another risk factor which is drug availability.¹⁰ It should also be noted that Begbie never indulged in drugs till the end but on the contrary, Tommy did start using drugs during the latter part of the film and shows that deviant peer affiliation does have some effect. Other important risk factors are sensation seeking and to relieve life stress¹¹ which are acceleration elements as well, evident from the statements Renton makes at the beginning of the film that they used drugs for the pleasure it gave and not having

⁷ Hser, Longshore and Anglin (n 2).

⁸ Chen and Kandel (n 1).

⁹ Farrington (n 3).

¹⁰ Hser, Longshore and Anglin (n 2).

¹¹ *ibid.*

to worry about anything.

Catalano et al. proposes the Social Development Model which integrates social learning, social bonding and differential association theories. It identifies that people rationally choose anti-social pathway by learning anti-social behaviour from peers and communities; seek opportunities motivated by hedonistic desire; and head towards the perceived rewards such as excitement and pleasure¹² and this model is indicative of Renton's onset and acceleration of drug abuse. It is also propounded that addiction is the outcome of learning, rather than pathology, which is accelerated through recurrent pursuit of attractive goals which condenses into a well-learned compulsive habit.¹³ This sums up Renton's developed addictive habit of pursuing the pleasure of heroin.

4. Desistance and relapse

The peak age of desistance from substance abuse is 20-29 years and the main motivating reasons have been identified to vary from getting a job, moving to a better area to getting married.¹⁴ In addition, the restoration of the spoiled identity has also been found to play a central role in desistance and recovery.¹⁵ This can be related to the time when Renton tried to quit heroin by using substitutes after comments from Begbie and his parents about him poisoning his body with chemicals and missing out on good opportunities. Moreover, this involved a rational and cognitive decision to change by Renton. This is similar to recognising positive opportunities, termed as 'hooks for change' which refers to using chances to desist problematic behaviour.¹⁶ He is seen even enjoying the normalcy of life by going out to party and meeting a girl and having realised how heroin robbed him of his sexual desires. However, although this resembles desistance, Renton was going through 'second type' of relapse – where a person resists the use of their primary drug but uses alternate drugs, in Renton's case, he uses amphetamines and drinks alcohol.¹⁷ He tries to abstain from drugs another time after his sentence was conditionally suspended by the court provided, he adheres to his treatment. The role of a therapeutic agent is also highlighted to aid in desistance because of the officer-offender

¹² Catalano R F, Park J, Harachi T W, Haggerty K P, Abbott R D and Hawkins J D, 'Mediating the effects of poverty, gender, individual characteristics, and external constraints on antisocial behavior: A test of the Social Development Model and implications for developmental life- course theory' (2005)

¹³ Marc Lewis, 'Addiction and the Brain: Development, Not Disease' [2017] *Neuroethics* 7.

¹⁴ Farrington (n 3).

¹⁵ James McIntosh and Neil McKeganey, 'Identity and Recovery from Dependent Drug Use: The Addict's Perspective' (2001) 8 *Drugs: education, prevention and policy* 47.

¹⁶ Peggy C Giordano, Stephen A Cernkovich and Jennifer L Rudolph, 'Gender, Crime, and Desistance: Toward a Theory of Cognitive Transformation' (2002) 107 *American Journal of Sociology* 990.

¹⁷ National Institute on Drug Abuse, 'Relapse and Recovery in Drug Abuse' (1986).

relationship built on trust.¹⁸ This time also he was on alternate drug, methadone, as part of his treatment.

Unfortunately, during both these endeavours, primary drug use had relapsed for Renton, which is known as the ‘basic type’ of relapse.¹⁹ It has been found that dependant drug users may relapse when they encounter a place or person or situation which was previously connected with their drug use.²⁰ In addition, it is important to note that not only desires promote habit but so does strategies used as coping mechanisms. Tackling depression and anxiety is highly correlated with substance use, where, addiction is viewed as a form of self-medication.²¹ These repetitive learning experiences once again settle in as habits. Renton’s repeated heroin use or the relapse can be identified as coping strategies to deal with the anxiety he faces on three different occasions. First, when he found out that Diane, the girl with whom he had sexual relation was underage; second, when everyone was affected by the death of baby Dawn; and third, when he felt he should have gone to prison instead of Spud. After each of these incidences, Renton was upset and faced anxiety and decided to cope these situations by reverting back to heroin use.

Also, important to note during the stage of desistance and relapse in Renton’s life is his involvement in crimes such as shoplifting and theft. Farrington opines that the interaction between people and the environment including opportunities is an important influencing factor to consider while focusing on the life-course and development of offences.²² In this case, Renton was addicted to heroin and lacked funds. He compares his life to a full-time business where he grasped all opportunities, broke cars and stole batteries, forged prescriptions, bribed and traded drugs, stole money from his parent’s wallet and engaged in shoplifting with his friends. It has been established that addicts, especially those of heroin, engage in income-generating crimes.²³ The most befitting theory in this scenario is the ‘direct casual connection’ which includes the explanation – drug use causes crime.²⁴ This can be extrapolated by the economic necessity theory propounded by Goldstein which elucidates that drug addicts resort

¹⁸ Sue Rex, ‘Desistance from Offending: Experiences of Probation’ (1999) 38 *The Howard Journal* 366.

¹⁹ National Institute on Drug Abuse (n 17).

²⁰ Hser, Longshore and Anglin (n 2).

²¹ Lewis (n 13).

²² Farrington (n 3).

²³ Trevor Bennett, Katy Holloway and David Farrington, ‘The Statistical Association between Drug Misuse and Crime: A Meta-Analysis’ (2008) 13 *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 107.

²⁴ *ibid.*

to crime since they are unable to fund their drugs through legitimate methods.²⁵ This also includes the case when they are unemployed and lack money²⁶ just as in the case of Renton and his friends. Research also shows that addicts engage in particular types of crime like shoplifting, theft, robbery, burglary to fund their drugs.²⁷ It is also insightful to note that the connection between drugs and crimes are stronger in adults as in the case of Renton, than in juveniles.²⁸

5. Cessation and recovery

Examination of life-course cessation among heroin addicts has revealed that cessation of heroin use is a slow process.²⁹ Overcoming addiction is suggested to involve one's own efforts³⁰ and many times, addicts recover on their own without any treatment.³¹ Also, increasing self-efficacy has been suggested to enhance the chances of long-term stable recovery.³² Strategies for desistance and sustaining cessation includes participating in alternative activities and also relying on the support of family and avoiding drugs and drug users.³³ In Renton's case, the support from his family is indeed noteworthy. After they noticed that his heroin use relapsed in spite of undergoing treatment, they locked him in a room, away from drugs and away from his drug user friends. An important factor aiding in desistance is breaking away from the delinquent peers³⁵ and deviant friends which are observed to be barriers to the process of desistance.³⁶ Although Renton faced challenges in the process of desistance in the form of cravings and hallucinations, overtime, he was clear of drugs with the support of his parents.

Strong social capital is a central factor in the process of recovery which includes interpersonal relationships which facilitates effective bonding of a person with society and also provides

²⁵ Paul J Goldstein, 'The Drugs/Violence Nexus: A Tripartite Conceptual Framework' (1985) 39 Journal of Drug Issues 143.

²⁶ Farrington (n 3).

²⁷ Bennett, Holloway and Farrington (n 23).

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ Yih-Ing Hser and others, 'A 33-Year Follow-up of Narcotics Addicts' (2001) 58 ARCH GEN PSYCHIATRY.

³⁰ Lewis (n 13).

³¹ Deborah A Dawson and others, 'Maturing Out of Alcohol Dependence: The Impact of Transitional Life Events' [2006] Journal of Studies on Alcohol.

³² Hser, Longshore and Anglin (n 2).

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ David Best, *Pathways to Recovery and Desistance* (Bristol University Press 2019).

³⁵ Farrington (n 3).

³⁶ Joanna Shapland and Anthony Bottoms, 'Reflections on Social Values, Offending and Desistance among Young Adult Recidivists' (2011) 13 Punishment and Society 256.

pathways for change.³⁷ Apart from social capital, ‘turning points’ is a key concept of life-course approach³⁸ which is conceptualized as a modification to the long-term pathway which was initiated earlier.³⁹ The process of cessation and recovery involves a turning point which makes person realise the need for personal change.⁴⁰ This could be a single or a gradual event and may involve particular experiences, events or awareness that results in a change.⁴¹ The turning point for Renton was when Diane told him about how fast the world is changing and he ought to find something new. Motivated by her words, he went to London and found himself a job and also kept away from his delinquent friends and their influence. Renton was self-determined and focused on his well-being and quality of life which are key factors of addiction recovery.⁴² Change of place, employment, stable relations also play an important role in recovery^{43,44} and it did so for Renton, who maintained stable and healthy relation with his family and Diane, was in London and was employed. Renton’s recovery even mirrors the CHIME recovery model which is an acronym for Connectedness; Hope; a positive sense of Identity; Meaning and Empowerment.⁴⁵ Renton’s process of recovery also shows that he had the necessary components of recovery capital – personal, self-efficacy and resilience; social, positive family and friends and away from substance users; community, house and employment.⁴⁶

Renton was clear of drugs and delinquent activities until Begbie and Sick Boy came in contact with him again and got him involved in a drug trade. This again depicts the effects of peer influence in offending.⁴⁷ Towards the end of the film, Renton was seen using heroin two times which shows that his drug user friends are ‘negative recovery capital’ which refers to all barriers to sustained recovery from addiction.⁴⁸ In spite of this, the film ends with Renton cheating his friends and running away with the money obtained from the drug trade wanting to

³⁷ John H Laub and Robert J Sampson, ‘Turning Points in the Life Course: Why Change Matters to the Study of Crime’ (1993) 31 *Criminology* 301.

³⁸ Cheryl Teruya and Yih-Ing Hser, ‘Turning Points in the Life Course: Current Findings and Future Directions in Drug Use Research’ (2010) 3 *Curr Drug Abuse Rev.* 189.

³⁹ Laub and Sampson (n 37).

⁴⁰ Hser, Longshore and Anglin (n 2).

⁴¹ Teruya and Hser (n 38).

⁴² Jessica De Maeyer, Wouter Vanderplasschen and Eric Broekaert, ‘Exploratory Study on Drug Users’ Perspectives on Quality of Life: More than Health-Related Quality of Life?’ (2009) 90 *Soc Indic Res* 107.

⁴³ Best (n 34).

⁴⁴ David Best, Jamie Irving and Kathy Albertson, ‘Recovery and Desistance: What the Emerging Recovery Movement in the Alcohol and Drug Area Can Learn from Models of Desistance from Offending’ (2017) 25 1.

⁴⁵ Mary Leamy and others, ‘Conceptual Framework for Personal Recovery in Mental Health: Systematic Review and Narrative Synthesis’ (2011) 199 *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 445.

⁴⁶ David Best and Alexandre B Laudet, ‘The Potential of Recovery Capital’ (2010).

⁴⁷ Farrington (n 3).

⁴⁸ William Cloud and Robert Granfield, ‘Conceptualizing Recovery Capital: Expansion of a Theoretical Construct’ (2008) 43 *Substance Use & Misuse* 1971.

start a new life. The ending shows that Renton no more wants to be with his friends and continue the deviant life. This shows his empowerment and self-determination which are strong constructs of recovery.⁴⁹ The film is silent to what happens beyond this. Whether his recovery is sustained and long-term, or whether he faces relapse, is not known. Enabled with strong recovery capitals, Renton can maintain his recovery over long-term.

6. Conclusion

As observed, the film *Trainspotting* does not reveal much about the onset of drug use and the relevant age. This paper has analysed the acceleration, desistance and relapse, cessation and recovery of Renton's substance abuse from a life-course perspective. The popular age-crime curve did not fit with Renton's offending behaviour since he was neither offending for life as the life-course-persistent model lays out, nor does his offending peak during his adolescence like the adolescence-limited model. In contrast, it mimics the adolescence-limited model since his drug use does indeed peak at a point of time and declines later but the age put-forth by the theory does not hold good in Renton's case. It has to be noted that in the case of Renton, desistance was associated with life transitions, experience and turning points rather than with age.⁵⁰ Renton was using heroin for pleasure but later, he got addicted and sought opportunities to use it – as coping mechanisms or for more pleasure. It also led to him engaging in criminal activities. With support from his parents, he overcame his addiction and Diane's words were a turning point which triggered him to seek a new pathway in life which was free of drugs.

Many factors like peer influence, family, socio-economic and genetic traits integrate and influence the onset of substance addiction⁵¹ and in Renton's case, peer influence and drug availability played a major role. Similarly, the pathway to desistance and recovery is a complex process which takes a long time and apart from personal motivation and commitment, also requires the support of family, friends and community⁵² which are the prime recovery capitals.⁵³

⁴⁹ Maeyer, Vanderplasschen and Broekaert (n 42).

⁵⁰ Laub and Sampson (n 37).

⁵¹ Farrington (n 3).

⁵² Best (n 34).

⁵³ Best and Laudet (n 46).

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