

Untimely Metamorphoses: compressed, relational and suspended time in the life-course transitions of incarcerated man and women in Chile

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Abstract

Developmental and life-course criminology has long treated time as a scaffold for sequence, order and duration: the age at which an event occurs, the interval between transitions, the calendar against which a life is judged early, on time, or late. On the basis of a qualitative study of incarcerated men and women in Chile, this paper argues that time is not only a coordinate within which criminal careers unfold but a substantive, unevenly distributed and narratively contested dimension of the life course itself. Drawing on 47 in-depth biographical interviews (23 men, 24 women), each conducted over three sessions during ten months of prison fieldwork and analysed through a hybrid deductive-inductive thematic analysis, the study identifies a pattern termed "untimely metamorphoses": life-course transitions that are not merely non-normative, but that arrive prematurely, abruptly, and cumulatively, compressing several stage-appropriate transitions into biographical windows of three to four years. Read alongside narrative criminology's account of narrative identity as the temporal integration of past, present and possible selves, these findings extend the theoretical repertoire available for the rethinking of time, drawing on a Latin American carceral setting, inclusive of both women and men, that remains markedly under-represented in the foundational literature.

Introduction

Time has always been a fundamental part in developmental and life-course criminology, but mostly as a background condition, not as an object of inquiry in its own right. Age-grade models of offending, cohort effects, the sequencing of transitions and the classic distinction between continuity and change all presuppose a chronological, essentially clock-line notion of time: a metric along which events can be placed, ordered and compared (Elder, 1998; Elder, Johnson & Crosnoe, 2003).

This metric has been extraordinarily productive, generating some of the field's most robust findings: the age-crime curve, the protective role of marriage and employment and the cumulative weight of early disadvantage. Nonetheless, it has also tended to treat timing as a property that attaches to the individual, a matter of when in a person's own biography an event occurs, and less as a property jointly produced by the structural conditions surrounding that individual at that moment. But what happens to developmental and life-course criminology's account of time when it is examined as a socially produced, unevenly distributed and narratively contested resource, rather than as a neutral axis along which lives are simple plotted? Moreover, despite the large scope of its principles and findings, life-course criminological literature remains westerly and high-income country focused, leaving open the question of whether these theoretical models travel to other contexts.

In Latin America, the evidence is limited. A longitudinal study in Brazil identified a crime curve for lethal violence peaking between the ages of 19 and 22, associated with the accumulation of poverty from birth through early adulthood (Murray et al., 2024). In Uruguay, Vigna (2012) found differences based on gender and type of crime, noting a later onset among women and for economic crimes. In Mexico, a study on drug cartels suggests that age structure has a negligible effect, as the territorial context and the presence of criminal organizations constrain the structure of opportunities (Chomczyński and Clark, 2023). In the Chilean context, decades of neoliberal policies have permeated the cultural, familial and institutional structures. Specific historic moments might have its own effect on life course of people reaching adolescence and adulthood in those particular moments (Neil & Sampson, 2021). Empirical research regarding criminal trajectories is scarce and has their own limitations, are based on judicial data or specific populations, such as young offenders or women in prison (Mettifogo et al. 2015; Pérez-Luco, Chitgian & Mettifogo, 2019; Larroulet et al. 2021). Therefore, a relevant gap is the absence of research addressing criminal trajectories in a broaden sample (males, females, diverse ages and crimes). Most of qualitative studies have reached individuals close to release from prison. An approach with persons who still have time of imprisonment ahead may capture another complexity in narratives less influenced by the expectation of release showing a different effect and conceptualization of time.

This study addresses this gap by investigating life-course through 47 in-depth biographical interviews with men and women incarcerated in Chile, conducted in three sessions per participant over ten months of prison fieldwork examined through hybrid thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This study asks what is the place of time in transitions and turning points in the life stories of incarcerated people in Chile. By answering this question, the study supports three arguments concerning issues that life-course criminology has, arguably, under-theorised. First, non-normative transitions can constitute a systemic, group-level pattern rather than an isolated individual deviation, this requires an additional level of analysis (biographical compression) that operates beyond the level of the single event. Second, the timing principle itself should be understood relationally, as a function of the resources available at the moment an event occurs, rather than as an intrinsic property of the chronological age alone. Third, incarceration produces a distinctive experience of suspended time that reorganises how earlier transitions are narrated and how future ones becomes thinkable at all. The findings offer context-sensitive insights for a study built on retrospective, biographically dense qualitative material from Chilean prisons, with a sample balanced between men and women, a vantage point from which the clock-time assumptions embedded in the field's founding become visible assumptions rather than a neutral description of how time works in a life surrounded by crime.

Literature review

Sequence, timing, and the clock-time assumption

Life-course criminology's foundational architecture rests on four principles articulated by Elder (1994, 1998, 2002; Elder & Giele, 2009): the historical location of lives in time and place, the timing of transitions, linked lives, and human agency within structural constraint. Timing concerns "whether an event or transition occurs early or late relative to other people and to normative expectations" (Elder & Giele, 2009, p.10) and it is this principle that grounds the classic distinction between normative transitions —discrete, bounded changes that occur within and expectable sequence such as schooling, first employment, or marriage— and non-normative or untimely transitions, which occur too early, too late, or out of the expected sequence (Elder, 1994).

This formulation owes a direct genealogical debt to Neugarten, Moore and Lowe's (1965) concept of the "social clock", the observation that age norms are themselves a consensual social product, specific to a given group at a particular historical moment, against which individuals judge themselves and others as early, on-time, or late. Given that Neu Garten's original account already treated the clock as group-specific and socially produced it is noteworthy that the subsequent life-course literature has tended to flatten it into a single, largely unexamined normative calendar – the very assumption that Chilean data presented here call into question.

The timing principle this contains, in principle, a genuinely relational insight: the same event can have markedly different consequences depending on when, in a person's life, it occurs and the principle explicitly links this to processes of cumulative advantage and disadvantage across the life course (DiPrete & Eirich, 2006; O'Rand, 2009). In practice, however, the timing principle has tended to operate as a measure of chronological deviation from a normative calendar – comparing an individual's age at transition to a population-level expectation – more than as an analysis of what makes an event timely or untimely for that individual in the first place. Studies of historical time within this transition have shown that the possibilities available to a cohort depend on when, historically, its members pass through adolescence and adulthood (Backman et al. 2014; Neil & Sampson, 2021), finding that sharpens, rather than resolves, the question posed here: if historical time so visible shapes what a given transition means, why should the timing principle continue to treat the individual event, rather than the resource context surrounding it, as the primary unit of temporal analysis?

A further complication concerns continuity and change. Life-course theory holds both that early traits and childhood experience are bound up with later development – such that antisocial behaviour in childhood is strongly associated with adult offending – and that the adult life course also matters in its own right, since experiences in adolescence or adulthood can redirect a trajectory that childhood alone would not predict (Elder et al., 2006; Laub, 2006). This dual commitment leaves open the question of what happens when, for a specific population the redirecting experiences of the "later" life course arrives at ages so early that they collapse into, rather than follow, the childhood foundational period. Farrington's (2018) grouping of developmental and life-course criminology under a single label, useful as it is for organising the field's shared concern with risk factors and turning points, does not by itself resolve this question, since it inherits the same largely chronological account of when development occurs.

Turning points and the assumption of intrinsic valence

A closely related concept, the turning point, captures the "hinge" moments that redirect a trajectory, closing options that had seemed available and opening others that had not previously existed or been considered (Elder, 1994; Sampson & Laub, 1993). Rutter (1996) proposes that life events operate as turning points through three mechanisms: opening or closing opportunities, producing a durable change in the environment, or altering self-concept beliefs, or expectations. Much of the subsequent literature – most influentially Sampson and Laub's (1993) treatment of marriage and stable employment as "hooks for change" – has tended to treat certain classes of events as bearing a largely fixed valence: parenthood, marriage, and employment are cast as generically protective, and their capacity to generate desistance is regarded as intrinsic to the event, not as contingent on the circumstances in which it occurs. Vigna (2011), writing within this classical tradition, present parenthood specifically as a "hook for change" that is predominantly and generically positive, a potent catalyst of dignity and purpose that facilitates desistance. Context and gender differences with regard to parenthood as a turning point have also been contested elsewhere (Schinkel, 2019).

This assumption of intrinsic valence has been increasingly challenged by research conducted in contexts of extreme structural exclusion. Di Marco, Sandberg and Fondevila (2025) argue that under conditions of extreme poverty, parenthood can function as a negative turning point that accelerates rather than interrupts a criminal career, as economic pressure and the absence of legal alternatives force an escalation of illicit activity to meet the basic needs a child represents. Their account suggests that a life event's protective capacity may depend on whether it arrives alongside frustration, an absence of resources, and conflict with existing social networks, which is exactly the resource-context question the classical hooks-for-change literature leaves underspecified.

The Global South and the cross-cultural question in time-focused life-course research

The classical life-course studies that anchor developmental and life-course criminology's account of timing and turning point – the Glueck's Boston-area cohort (Glueck & Glueck, 1950), later extended by Sampson and Laub (1993, 2003), and the parallel Philadelphia cohort followed by Wolfgang et al. (1972) – were built on populations navigating the labour markets, welfare states, and family structures of mid-twentieth-century North America. Whether the resulting models apply to societies with very different institutional scaffolding, informal economies, and subsidiary states is a question the field has begun to ask more insistently in recent years, chiefly through comparative desistance research (Graham & McNeill, 2017). What that literature has established for the mechanisms of desistance – that family, employment, and moral frameworks function differently, though not necessarily less powerfully – the present study asks specifically about time: does the timing principle and the classificatory apparatus of normative and non-normative transitions built upon it, travel intact to a setting of extreme structural adversity, or does it require contextual elaboration that comparative desistance scholars have already begun to supply for its neighbouring concepts?

Moreover, the question concerns not only comparative criminology, it also has a longer anthropological roots, since Evans-Pritchard's (1940) classic account of Nuer time demonstrated that chronometric time is itself a culturally specific metric, not a neutral substrate onto which any population's experience can be mapped. Later, Fabian (1983) went further still, showing how disciplines that study populations whose temporality departs from the observer's own risk relegating those populations to a conceptual past, a "denial of coevalness" with a clear resonance for a field whose founding models were developed with one population and applied, often without reflexivity, to others.

Latin America, and Chile in particular, remain notably under-represented in this literature, despite the region's persistently high rates of incarceration and violent crime relative to other middle-income settings. The qualitative material analysed here – biographically dense, gender balanced, and produced inside

the very institution, the prison, whose temporal logic this paper treats as a third register of analysis— offers a standpoint from which the field's predominantly Northern, male and quantitative account of timing can be examined against a very different empirical base. This does not imply the Chilean carceral trajectories are representative of a broader Latin American pattern, instead, the study offers the kind of situated test that comparative criminology increasingly recognises as necessary before any concept developed on one population is assumed to hold for another.

Narrative time: the constitutive relationship between story and biography

Narrative criminology adds a second, complementary layer to this discussion. Where life-course criminology asks when events occur, narrative criminology asks how they are told and stated that the relationship between story and experience is not merely representational. Following Ricoeur (1983) narrative can be understood in three ways: as an objective representation of experience, as its subjective interpretation, or as constitutive of experience itself, the position adopted by narrative criminology (Presser & Sandberg, 2015), in which the story a person talks about their life does not simply follow from what happened but actively organises what becomes narratable, and therefore thinkable, in the future. Ricoeur's (1996) concept of narrative identity is particularly relevant here: identity is not given but continuously reconfigured through the retrospective and prospective work of narration, in other words, narrative identity is itself a temporal operation because it binds who one was, who one is, and who one might still become into a single, ongoing account.

For the purposes of thematic analysis, this constitutive view of narrative requires a specific analytic decision about which elements of a story to prioritise. Labov's (1972) classic model identifies six elements of narrative structure (abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution and coda) but not all are equally suited to a study concerned with life-course meaning rather than with narrative form. This research draws selectively on elements of the problematic event, its evaluation, and its resolution treating them as a resource for identifying themes across life-course transitions and not for analysing the formal architecture of storytelling itself. This decision distances the study from more structure-centred approaches within narrative criminology. For instance, Poppi (2026) argues that compositional architecture of a story, its crafting style, may be a more precise indicator of desistance or persistence than thematic content, while remaining compatible with the study's guiding interest in the meaning's participants attribute to their own trajectories rather than in predicting future behaviour from linguistic markers. A related perspective concerns the unit of narration: Canter and Youngs (2012) and Youngs and Canter (2012) focus on narratives of the specific offence, arguing that this best capture a subject's agency and intention in the immediate context of the criminal act. By contrast, the present study is oriented toward the narration of the whole life course, consistent with its anchoring in life-course criminology the concerns are less with reconstructing the specific offence that led to imprisonment than with understanding how a person narrates a life as a whole -one that includes, but is not exhausted by, criminal involvement.

Life-course criminology offers a structural account of when events matter but treats timeliness largely as a matter of chronological placement against a normative calendar, narrative criminology offers an account of how time is narratively organised but has been comparatively less concerned with the structural determinants of why some pasts become tellable as compressed, urgent or foreclosed, and others as gradual, orderly and open. The empirical material presented below suggest that these two temporalities (structural time and narrative time) are not separate registers but are produced together, in the same biographical process, and that a rethinking of time in developmental life-course criminology needs an account capacious enough to hold both.

Methods

Research design

This research draws on qualitative study of the biographical narratives of men and women deprived of liberty in Chile and theoretically grounded in the convergence between life-course criminology and methodologically committed to a constructionist, meaning-centred epistemological position. The design's central premise is that criminal trajectories cannot be adequately understood through the variables typically available on official records or panel surveys alone, they require access to the meanings participants themselves attribute to the transitions and turning points of their own lives, produced through a sustained, dialogical research relationship rather than a single structured encounter.

Study context: Chilean prisons as fieldwork site.

Fieldwork was conducted over ten months across penal facilities in Chile's Metropolitan region: the CDP Santiago Sur (the oldest prison in the country), Puente Alto, and Colina 1 and 2 for male participants, and the female prison of San Joaquín. Smaller facilities and the maximum-security prison were excluded for reasons of feasibility and access, as was the facility housing individuals convicted of crimes against humanity, since such offences were not included in the sampling criteria.

Conducting research inside a total institution shaped every stage of the study, from access to the physical conduct interviews. Access, in particular, required sustained institutional negotiation with Chile's prison administration (Gendarmeria) and remained an open issue throughout the fieldwork rather than being settled once at the outset: rotating custodial staff periodically required the researcher to re-explain and re-justify the study's purpose and the availability of interview space fluctuated with the institution's operational demands. In women's facilities, interviews typically took place in administrative offices, school areas, the library, or classrooms, environments that afforded somewhat greater flexibility of movement between pedagogical and common areas but also higher exposure to interruption, given the multifunctional use of those same spaces. In men's facilities, interviews were conducted principally in offices for social work interviews and guard-post premises, environments more severely constrained by overcrowding, on at least one occasion, in the absence of any available office, an interview was conducted in a corridor. Environmental conditions (persistent noise, structural deficiencies, including water infiltration, and the general architecture of punishment characteristic of these facilities) were not incidental background but part of the ecology the researcher had to navigate in order to preserve both access and the confidentiality of each conversation.

The ten-month presence in the field thus became a methodological resource in its own right, not merely a logistical requirement. Over time, custodial staff came to recognise the researcher as a familiar, predictable presence, easing the friction of daily access even as a new staff periodically required the process to begin again. This prolonged immersion also enabled the researcher to move beyond an initial institutional filter on participant recruitment, as described below.

Sampling and participants

A purposive, maximum-variation sampling strategy (Creswell & Poth, 2018) was designed at the outset, since the study's focus was not on any single offence category but on the diversity of trajectories leading to incarceration. Inclusion criteria specified men and women, of varying ages convicted of different types of offence, the only exclusion were economic crimes, crimes against humanity, and individuals held in pre-trial detention rather than serving a sentence. As fieldwork progresses, criteria of opportunity, convenience, and snowball referral were incorporated alongside the original purposive design.

Recruitment underwent a deliberate methodological transition over the course of the study, moving from convenience sampling mediated by prison staff toward a snowball strategy reinforced by participant's own spontaneous interest. In the initial phase, selection was mediated by the prison staff which tended to facilitate access to "low-risk" individuals with a record of good behaviour and internal privileges, a filter which, for the researcher's safety excluded individuals identified as violent. As trust and familiarity built up over months in the field, additional recruitment channel emerged: participants recommended other participants, and individuals who noticed the researcher during waiting periods in corridors and yards began to come forward on their own initiative to offer their own testimony. This shift enabled the researcher to actively request specific profiles under-represented by the institutional filter—notably individuals convicted of drug-trafficking offences, once referrals had begun to cluster around common property crimes—and to contrast individuals with extensive criminal histories against those with far shorter ones, thereby partially correcting the selection bias introduced by staff-mediated referral in the study's early phase.

The final sample comprised 47 participants: 23 men and 24 women, a composition that is comparatively unusual in a field whose foundational studies were based on predominantly or exclusively male cohorts. This near-parity was not incidental but reflected a deliberate methodological decision, as it allows the analysis to register gendered differences in how temporal disruption is lived and narrated, differences that prove central to how relational and suspended time operate.

Table 1
Participant characteristics

N°	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Children	Offence type	Year of imprisonment	Time of sentence
1	Aida	49	F	1	Drug-trafficking	2020	18 months
2	Javiera	49	F	2	Drug-trafficking	2021	6 years
3	Victoria	37	F	1	Drug-trafficking	2019	10 years
4	Alicia	27	F	2	Homicide	2019	15 years
5	Claudia	21	F	0	Homicide	2020	10 years
6	Daniela	39	F	3	Kidnapping	2019	4 years
7	Luisa	45	F	3	Robbery	2007	21 years
8	Paola	26	F	1	Robbery	2016	6 years
9	Nadia	27	F	1	Robbery	2019	4 years
10	Genoveva	33	F	3	Kidnapping	2018	10 years
11	Paula	48	F	2	Homicide	2017	12 years
12	Fabiola	29	F	2	Robbery	2019	5 years
13	Liliana	52	F	4	Drug-trafficking	2016	10 years
14	Karla	36	F	3	Homicide	2021	6 years
15	Angélica (Peruvian)	21	F	0	Robbery	2018	6 years
16	Isolda	52	F	4	Drug-trafficking	2021	3 years
17	Carolina	33	F	3	Incendio	2019	5 years
18	Leticia (Spanish)	44	F	0	Drug-trafficking	2018	8 years
19	Úrsula	35	F	1	Homicide	2019	10 years
20	Michelle	38	F	0 (1 dead)	Robbery	2022	23 years
21	Juana	40	F	7 (3 dead)	Homicide	2019	12 years
22	Emilia (Bolivian)	24	F	1	Drug-trafficking	2022	3 years
23	Magdalena	25	F	0	Kidnapping/extortion	2020	13 years
24	Carmela	36	F	0	Robbery	2018	13 years
25	Alejandro	64	M	3	Sexual abuse	2017	7 years
26	Pepito	46	M	3	Drug-trafficking	2021	3 years
27	Jaime	39	M	2	Robbery	2019	5 years
28	Gabriel	44	M	3	Femicide	2012	17 years
29	Fefe	41	M	3	Femicide	2018	10 years
30	Flaco	39	M	1	Robbery	2017	15 years
31	Diego	39	M	2	Robbery	2018	5 years
32	Osvaldo	36	M	1	Robbery	2016	10 years
33	Jesús	38	M	2	Kidnapping	2019	7 years
34	Mozo	31	M	0	Robbery	2017	10 years
35	Jardinero	46	M	6	Robbery	2019	7 years
36	Colo colo	40	M	3	Robbery	2017	10 years
37	Andrés	38	M	2	Femicide	2018	19 years
38	José	22	M	0	Arms trafficking	2020	3 years
39	Cristóbal	40	M	0	Kidnapping	2019	6 years
40	Roberto	33	M	1	Robbery	2014	18 years
41	Joaquín	41	M	3	Drug-trafficking	2011	26 years

N°	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Children	Offence type	Year of imprisonment	Time of sentence
42	Ariel	34	M	2	Drug-trafficking	2017	9 years
43	Eduardo	34	M	5	Sexual abuse	2020	7 years
44	Germán (Ecuadorian)	27	M	3	Drug-trafficking	2020	10 years
45	Diuco	64	M	1	Femicide	2021	Life sentence
46	Chino (Peruvian)	33	M	0	Robbery	2019	7 years
47	Rubio	33	M	1	Homicide	2017	10 years

Data collection

Data were generated through in-depth, biographically focused life-history interviews. Each participant was interviewed in three separate sessions during the ten-month fieldwork period. This design was intended to build the trust needed for accounts that a single encounter rarely elicits (Tewksbury & Gagné, 2001), and to capture the life story as a dialogically constructed, evolving account rather than a single closed report produced under of high self-presentational stakes. As in any social setting, participants adjust their self-presentation to context (Goffman, 1959), inside a prison, where a great deal can be at stake in how one is perceived, this adjustment is especially pronounced (Tewksbury & Gagné, 2001). The multi-session design was therefore conceived as a way of allowing rapport, rather than a single first impression, to shape what could be told. All interviews were conducted face to face within the facilities described above.

Data analysis

Data were codified in N-Vivo 14 and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in its hybrid, deductive-inductive form (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). A code book was developed a priori from the research question and from the life-course and narrative-criminology literature reviewed and applied alongside inductive, data-driven coding sensitive to categories emerging directly from participant's accounts. This hybrid design allowed categories not anticipated by the theoretical framework, including the pattern reframed here as biographical compression and the broader phenomenon termed untimely metamorphosis, to surface without abandoning the conceptual anchoring that permits dialogue with the life-course and narrative-criminology literatures. Coding proceeded iteratively and recursively, not in a single linear pass, moving back and forth between data familiarisation, code generation, and theme development as the analysis progressed, consistent with recent methodological guidance on operationalising thematic analysis as a non-linear quality-checked process (Ahmed et al. 2025).

In line with the qualitative logic of thematic analysis, theme development prioritised meaning over prevalence: a pattern expressed by only a few participants could still constitute a theme if it illuminated something analytically significant about how the phenomenon was experienced, rather than being discarded because of its low frequency. Codes were also relevance to the research questions (Naeem et al., 2023), which led several initially coded categories, for instance, references to extended kin outside the immediate household or gang affiliation, to be set aside for insufficient depth or relevance once the coding to theme transition was underway.

Ethics

The study received institutional ethics committee approval and the formal authorisation of Gendarmeria de Chile prior to fieldwork. Given the vulnerability of the population and the sensitivity of the material solicited, which included, for a substantial number of participants, accounts of childhood abuse, intimate partner and sexual violence, and the loss of children, particular attention was given to risks and harm assessment, informed consent procedures adapted to the custodial setting, and the confidentiality of both identities and interview content, in line with established guidance for research with incarcerated populations (Beyens et al., 2015; Liebling et al., 1999). All participants gave informed consent and all names appearing in this paper are pseudonyms.

Findings: three temporal registers of untimely metamorphoses

Across the corpus, temporality structures the data along three interrelated but analytically distinct registers. Compressed time concerns the collapse of stage-appropriate transitions into narrow biographical windows during childhood and adolescence. Relational time concerns the way the same class of event—a parent's release from prison, a school expulsion, an experience of violence—takes on sharply different, sometimes opposite, meanings for the trajectory depending on the resources and relationships available when it occurs. Suspended time concerns the distinctive temporal experience produced by loss, disclosure, and incarceration itself, in which biographical time appears to stop for the person even as it continues, visibly, for everyone around them.

Compressed time: the collapse of the life-course sequence

The most consistent pattern across the interviews is the premature assumption of adult responsibilities: caregiving for younger siblings amid parental absence, incarceration, or neglect, early motherhood or fatherhood, and early entry into paid or illicit work. Life-course theory calls transitions that occur outside their expected timing non-normative (Elder, 1994); the data show, however, that, under the conditions of poverty, violence, and institutional neglect described by participants, such transitions are so pervasive that they can no longer be meaningfully described as exceptions to a norm. They are, in this sample, the modal pattern rather than a deviation from it.

The transition into a caregiving role during childhood so systematically that it constitutes one of the most significant thematic cores of the corpus. Between roughly seven and ten years of age, in response to a parent's absence, incarceration, or neglect, several participants assumed care of younger siblings or

management of the household, functions that, under ordinary circumstances, would fall to adults. This process, which the specialized literature calls parentification (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973), does not simply add a burden of work, but it reorganised identity available time, and the range of trajectories that remain thinkable.

Diego's case is paradigmatic. With his father incarcerated and his mother selling pastries by the roadside, Diego left the school at six, began working as an informal car-park attendant in central Santiago, and took on responsibility for supporting the household. That his younger sisters call him "dad" is not merely an affecting detail, it expresses a genuine generational inversion that came to define his identity in lasting ways, an identity that coexists in tension with the criminal trajectory that the same precarity would later impose:

"I was in first grade when my dad went to prison, for assaulting a police officer, they sentenced him to ten years. So from that time on I basically had to skip the school; I'd tell my mom we were going to school because there were already four of us kids, my mom went out to sell pastries on the highway, so I'd tell her I was going to school, I'd tell my sister to look after our brothers and I'd go downtown, to watch cars, to make a coin, so we'd have something at home. My childhood was hard. Everything my little sisters say now -sometimes they say, Diego has been my dad, Diego has always been my dad- when something was missing, when he'd come pick me up from the school he was always there" Diego.

Of particular analytical significance is a remark Diego makes later in the same interview, he concludes his description of childhood: "I think that's where the mistakes were, I didn't make the best decisions". This self-attribution of individual responsibility for what is, in fact, a structural situation -an incarcerated father, poverty, forced school abandonment- illustrates what might be termed an agentification of the structural problem: the narrator relocates causality onto his own choices, minimising the role of circumstances he did not control.

Daniela's trajectory is similar, though more extreme: twelve siblings, an absent father, and a mother whose presence Daniela describes as intermittent, marked by drinking on weekends and absences of several days at a time-a pattern that, in analytic terms, constitutes parental neglect. Daniela began working at nine, first in agricultural labour, and took on the care of her younger siblings with an explicit awareness of the maternal role she had assumed:

"I've always worked, since I was nine years old. We were twelve siblings -two died, ten of us are alive- so we were always short of money. My dad left us, abandoned us all, and my mom would go out drinking with this one and that one and leave as three of our days on our own. I think what made me grow up in my head was my little brother- I'd go out and beg for bread with them and look after them because I didn't know if some man could touch them or do something to them"-Daniela.

Luisa's accounts add a further dimension: caring for a younger brother in a context of sexual abuse by men her mother brought into the home. Where the mother fails to provide protection, Luisa organised her own conduct around protecting her brother before herself, a prioritisation characteristic of parentification, in which the child learns that their worth lies in caring for others rather than in satisfying their own needs:

"I've never even told my father. And I had to look after my little brother. I was his mother in the house. My little brother calls me mom"-Luisa.

A second component of compressed time concerns early motherhood and fatherhood, most often within relationships marked by a partner's own criminal involvement and an absence of supportive kin networks. Victoria's account illustrates how the absence of maternal support during adolescence, rather than any single decisive event, produced the conditions in which early motherhood became legible as a source of belonging that schooling and the family of origin had failed to provide:

"My mom was always strict, hard -there wasn't much motherly love or tenderness, she really treated us differently. She never gave me freedom or love, like if I wanted to study -maybe if she had, I would have studied why I wanted to have my son. It was my decision; it was like having something of my own"-Victoria

Nadia's account shows the same pattern converging directly with entry into drug trafficking, mediated by a partner she met at fourteen:

"Bad company, I met my daughter's father when I was fourteen, and that's when I started with him, and that's how I learned about trafficking. He was the one involved. Through him I learned to deal, to sell little packets"-Nadia.

In both cases, the causal chain that participants themselves draw is explicit: the absence of maternal support produces a void of economic sustenance, of care for one's own children that criminal involvement comes to fill as a survival strategy. Moreover, this occurs within an adolescent window barely wide enough to accommodate the romantic relationships, the pregnancy and the onset of trafficking that follow.

A third component of compressed time is the early onset of substance use, frequently overlapping in the same narrow window with school disengagement, exposure to domestic violence, and the beginnings of criminal involvement. Cristobal, who reports smoking marijuana at the age of nine, offers an account in which the connection between childhood events and his own trajectory is narratively oblique but structurally visible: his father

was imprisoned, alcoholism, with no domestic violence and very early drug use are juxtaposed without then narrating how his father eventually gave up alcohol and crime, but by then his son's trajectory was already under way. This illustrates how the formative years, once lived, shape a field of subsequent possibilities and dispositions that a parent's later change does not automatically reverse.

Taken together, these three components (early caregiving, parenthood and substance use) do not occur as isolated, if premature, events. Across the corpus, they are linked in a chain within remarkably narrow windows, typically three to four years, roughly between the ages of twelve and sixteen, such that early caregiving responsibilities lead to school disengagement, which in turn leads to informal or illicit work and subsequently to the first involvement in crime,

often overlapping with the onset of a romantic relationship and an early pregnancy or fatherhood. This a compounding process can be described as biographical compression: stages that in a normative life course are distributed across decades are instead superimposed within a period too brief for any single institutional intervention —educational, social or therapeutic— to interrupt the chain at any one point, since by the time one node of the chain becomes visible to an institution, several subsequent links may already be in place.

This compression is not only chronological but identity-transforming, which is why this study speaks of metamorphosis rather than transition. Whereas a life-course transition, in the technical sense denotes a change of role within a continuing self, several participants describe changes that reorganise who they are, foreclosing developmental stages that were never lived and that cannot, in their own account, be retrieve. A child who assumes an adult caregiving role cannot recover the childhood thar role displaced, and adolescent who becomes pregnant within a relationship marked by her partner's criminal involvement cannot return to a prior, unmarked position. This irreversibility -the impossibility, narratively asserted rather than merely logically true of any biography, of reclaiming a foreclosed stage- distinguishes the phenomenon from a simple description of early transitions, and it is what the adjective untimely is meant to capture: these transitions are premature, in that they arrive years before the stage-appropriate age, abrupt, in that they occur without preparation, gradualness, or a containing network, and cumulative in that several converge within the same narrow window, producing a compression that a single, well-timed intervention cannot easily undo.

Relational time: turning point without intrinsic valence

A second register concerns the meaning of evens classically treated in the literature as turning points. The data are broadly consistent with Rutter's (1996) typology of the mechanisms through which life events operate -opening or closing opportunities, producing durable environmental change, or altering self-concept- but they also reveal a pattern the typology does not anticipate: the same class of event can open a pathway at one point in a trajectory and close it at another, and can also do so within the same life story, depending on the relational and material resources present when it occurs.

Analysis of narratives about incarcerated parents reveals a finding that runs counter to intuitive expectations: a parent's return home from prison does not always represent an improvement. In several accounts, a father's or mother's release is experienced ad a destabilising turning point that triggers new conflict, reconfigures previously stable family dynamics, and can mark the starting point of the children's own criminal trajectories. Alicia's case is illustrative. During her father's absence -he was serving a sentence for homicide- the family lived under a different structure: the daughters participated in religious worship, and there were discipline and routine. His release, however brought drug trafficking into the home, changes in the mother's behaviour, and the daughter's exposure to previously unfamiliar world:

"He was first inside for robbery before I was born, for about a year and a half, then, when I was almost two and my little sister has just been born, he got into a fight and went in for homicide. He was sentenced to ten years. Then my dad goes out and it was like everything fell apart -he got out after nine years with benefits. And he had been very quiet; we went to the Jehovah's Witnesses. And then my dad go out and started dealing and my older sister started going to parties and then the second one, and I was a curious kid too. The bug bit me and I started wanting to go to parties too, with my sister, I started going out". -Alicia.

This account reverses the intuitive protective valence typically attributed to family reunification, and does so because of the moment at which, in the family's development, the reunification occurs: arriving at a point when the daughters were entering adolescence, the father's release converts a previously stable arrangement into one destabilised from within.

A second component of relational time concerns the role of the school system as a turning point, one that more often reflects institutional failure than individual deficit. Across the corpus, a recurring institutional trajectory moves from ordinary schooling to schools the receive only students expelled elsewhere, a trajectory that itself signals a social pathway which the education system helps to consolidate rather than interrupt. This has direct implications for how life-course criminology approaches school failure. The canonical literature tends to regard academic underperformance as an individual risk factor, a characteristic of the subject that predicts problematic trajectories, these narratives suggest instead that, with comparable or greater frequency, it is the outcome of an institutional failure that the standard explanatory model does not incorporate. More precisely, what appears to underlie persistence in crime is not low academic performance as an individual attribute, but the process by which the school, in failing to provide containment, diagnosis, and retention, contributes to the cumulative disadvantage that Sampson and Laub (1997) themselves identify as the central mechanism of persistence. The resulting circuit can be summarised as follows: an institution that neither accompanies nor sustains, then loss of connection to conventional life, a greater exposure to risk networks and environments, and finally the onset or consolidation of a criminal trajectory. The school is not a neutral backdrop in this circuit; it is an actor whose action or omission carries tangible biographical consequences.

The experience of violence appears in both men's and women's accounts, but with qualitative differences so pronounced that treating them jointly would be misleading. In men's narratives, violence is principally environmental: domestic violence suffered by the mother, or a neighbourhood conflict. In women's narratives, by contrast, violence (especially sexual and intimate-partner violence) is frequently the single most heavily weighted biographical turning point. This difference does not appear attributable to a sampling or interview-guide artefact; rather, it reflects a structural reality in which women are exposed to specific forms of violence with profound and long-lasting biographical consequences.

Osvaldo's account represents the more common male pattern: violence within the family environment that threatens the mother, rather than the narrator directly.

"I saw violence every day really. The drank, they were drug users, violent, criminals -my mother's siblings. It was bad, I was a kid, it scared me, I just didn't 'want to happen to my mom, because I'd see her right in the middle, trying to separate them". Osvaldo

Juana clearly identifies the chain of events set off by the sexual abuse she suffered between the ages of six and nine: school abandonment, the onset of substance use, institutional rebellion, expulsion. What is most striking, however, is her mother's reaction: on learning of the abuse, she chose to remain with

the abuser and sent Juana to live with her father, a second point as determinative as the first.

"I went to school through eighth grade. The I decided not to study anymore, because I started getting into drugs, alcohol. And because I was raped from age six to nine. That stopped me from studying really. It was my mom's partner. Because after I spoke up, my mom decided to stay with the man and send to live with my dad. My life changed, and changed for the worse, I started skipping school, my grades dropped, I started talking back to teachers. Then they expelled me, no school would take me, until I ended up at a school that in everyone who'd been expelled from everywhere else." Juana

Carolina's account of prolonged intimate-partner violence shows how the same relationship can be narrated simultaneously, in terms of danger and of belonging, a duality that resists the simple protective/harmful binary the classical hook-for-change literature assumes:

"He was bad, he hit me while I was pregnant, punches. He'd leave me lying in the fields, in the car, and drive off, me pregnant, bleeding from my head.

Why did you stay with him if he hit you?

Because I loved him. Or, I don't know if it was love or habit, I felt safe with him, because he was tough. I liked that people respected him for being bad.

And what do you think about that now?

That it was wrong. I was foolish, I didn't think it through, I let myself go because of the drugs, the company I kept, thinking I was tougher than the next person, and in the end I wasn't, and look where I am now". Carolina

Violence against girls and women, in its various forms, triggers a range of subsequent decisions: leaving the household, dropping out of school using drugs, engaging in violent behaviour of one's own. Far from being irrational, these responses are adaptations to environments in which the protection ordinarily expected from conventional institutions -family, school, the state- has been systematically absent. The fact that sexual violence appears only exceptionally in men's narratives, and never as a structuring turning point, whereas it is recurrent and functionally central in women's reinforces that women's criminal trajectories cannot be adequately understood through analytic frameworks built on predominantly male populations, and the intersection of gendered violence, sexual abuse and crime requires the kind of specific theoretical treatment the feminist criminology has begun to develop (Carlen, 1988; Chesney-Lind, 1989; Almeda, 2003; Gålnander, 2020) but that has not yet been fully integrated into mainstream life-course models.

4.3 Suspended time: loss, disclosure, and the freeze of biographical time

The third register concerns events and experiences in which biographical time appears, in participant's own accounts, to stop -for the self, if not for the world around them- producing a rupture so absolute that it reorganises the narrative identity built up to that point.

The loss of a child -through death, through the action of the judicial system, or through a third party's decision- is narrated with an emotional intensity that distinguishes it from any other turning point in the corpus. While the other events described are experienced as ruptures of the trajectory, the loss of a child is described as a rupture in the very meaning of one's existence. Indeed, no other event in the interviews produces such a radical reorientation of narrative identity. Michele identifies the death of her one-year-old son as "the root of everything": the point at which her trajectory changed irrevocably. Her son's death produced not only grief, but also a void of meaning that alcohol and drugs came to fill, which in turn opened the door to criminal involvement:

"I already played the mother role when I was little myself. So, I thought of myself as a grown girl, I got pregnant at thirteen, and I lost my son at one year old and that's when my life with drugs and crime began. That's the root of everything. He died of respiratory arrest, he was born by forceps delivery and they pinched an artery in his brain, and he developed a brain haemorrhage, went blind, was fed by tube. He died when he was one, and months after he died, I started drinking, using drugs, living the life, not the life I used to live, the life of the world of crime. I met people, and that took me to where I am now". Michelle

Osvaldo, by contrast, describes how a related form of loss (the death of a parent) is shaped by whether it occurs during incarceration or at liberty, underscoring the dimension of emotional isolation that imprisonment imposes on grief itself.

"No, I was free, I'd only been out a little while. My mom died in 2010, thank God I was out, I could be with her. I've seen it happen to companions of mine here, their mother or someone important in the family dies while they're locked up, and it's hard. You're stuck between four walls, banging your head against the wall, because you know your family is suffering, your brothers, your children, and not being able to be with them is terrible, I thank God I could be with my mom, with my dad, my brothers". Osvaldo.

Reas alongside Michelle's account, Osvaldo's testimony shows that loss operates through quite different mechanisms depending on the temporal and institutional position of the person who experiences it: for Michele, the loss itself precipitates the trajectory into crime, for Osvaldo, it is not the loss but the prospect of experiencing loss while incarcerated -cut off from the family unable to mourn collectively- that constitutes the biographically significant temporal threat.

A further component of suspended time concerns the disclosure of family secret -most of them relating to paternity or a parent's earlier attempt to relinquish the child- typically at ages when the revelation cannot be integrated into an already-formed sense of self without disrupting it. Victoria describes learning at fourteen, from an alcoholic grandmother, the then man who raised her was not her biological father and that her mother had attempted to give her up for adoption at birth:

"I found out at fourteen that he wasn't my dad, that my youngest brother really was, because the three of us carry his surname. And since I've had any sense of things, I've seen my dad right there. I never imagined he wasn't my dad, because he never made a difference between the three of us. I was his favourite actually. My grandmother told me: you have to love your dad very, very much, because even though he isn't your dad, he's always raised you as his daughter. And I went crazy, I went crazy. Because she also told me my mom wanted to give up for adoption, and that my dad had arrived at the hospital with her before my mom could

go through with it. So I was a mess, because between that and my mom, I always had friction with her, since I was little, because my mom really did make a difference, too much of one”- Victoria.

Carolina recounts a comparable disclosure, of a sexual relationship with her mother’s partner, entered into, by her own account, “all because of drugs”, narrated with the surprise of someone recognising in the act of telling I for the first time, why she has never told anyone before. This pattern —a secret that emerges without the narrator quite knowing why— suggests that the interview itself functioned, in some cases, as a space for working through experiences that had never before found expression, a methodological observation with implications for how researchers working with life-history interviews in carceral settings should anticipate and prepare to respond to this kind of disclosure.

The experience of incarceration itself —the prison as turning point, in its own right— is experienced in radically different ways depending on when, it occurs in the trajectory (the timing principle once again) on prior criminal history, and on the specific conditions of the sentence. For participants with already extended criminal trajectory, early terms of imprisonment consolidate criminal identity and expand networks and competencies. Jaime describes his release from his first, adolescent sentence in terms that make this consolidation explicit.

“I got my first sentence at seventeen. I was in Tiempo Joven for two months, then transferred to the juvenile section of the penitentiary, another six months- eight months and fifteen days in total. I was desperate to get out. When we got sentenced, he got five years because he was an adult, and I got three years and a day, suspended, because I was a minor, so they let me out, and I was happy, I tried to pick my life back up -but I came out more streetwise, as they say. I learned bad things toom you and up around matters a lot, and I came out streetwise, still a kid, seventeen, not really weighing what life meant. And having a daughter -a daughter I left behind- I didn’t even think about her, and to this day that weighs on me”. Jaime

For participants entering without a prior criminal record, by contrast, the first experience of incarceration is a turning point of maximum intensity, perceived as a violent irruption into a hitherto different trajectory. Their accounts of disorientation and disbelief on entering a world whose codes are entirely unfamiliar reveal a position of greater institutional vulnerability, but also a reflexivity about the offence itself that participants with more consolidated trajectories do not always display. Karla’s image of the prison as a freezer, or as “the cemetery of the living” -image echoed, in different forms, throughout the corpus- encapsulates the temporal paradox this register makes visible: time inside is experienced as stopped for the incarcerated person, while it continues, visibly and often painfully, for everyone outside, children who have grown up in one’s absence by the time of release, relationships that have moved on, opportunities that have closed.

“It’s like I wouldn’t want to come back here again, because it’s like a freezer, you lose so much of your life’s time here. It’s a freezer, it’s like the cemetery of the living.

Is it like life stops?

Time, everything....then you get out, you see people, your daughters, you see them so grown up, everything changes”. Karla

Karla’s metaphor captures, with unusual precision, what Husserl’s (1928/1991) phenomenology of internal time-consciousness describes as the retention-protection structure of lived time: the experienced present is never a bare instant but is constituted by the immediate retention of what has just occurred and the protention of what is about to occur. What Karla describes as time “stopping” is not the cessation of clock time but the rupture of this structure -an inability to pretend a future continuous with her own biography, while the world outside continues generate its own retentions and protentions (“your daughters...so grown up”) from which she is excluded. This phenomenological reading provides the suspended-time register with a theoretical grounding that goes beyond metaphor. It also connects directly to the narrative-identity framework drawn from Ricoeur (1996) since his own account of narrative time is built, via Heidegger, on precisely this Husserlian foundation.

What distinguishes this register from the other two is that it makes explicit the interplay between structural and narrative time which, it is argued here, underlies all three. The prison does not simply suspend clock time, it produces a narratable rupture -a before and an after- that participants, depending on the institutional and relational conditions available to them, may either use to reorganise their account of who they are, moving towards in the redemption narrative that Maruna (2001) documented in other contexts and that is also observed here in the Chilean case, or fails to use, remaining instead in a position of ambivalence: change is recognised as desirable, but is understood as conditional on resources (housing, decent employment, support networks) that no actor guarantees. This ambivalence is not indecision; it is a structurally honest narrative position for someone who wants a different future but lacks the material scaffolding to narrate it as more than provisional.

Discussion: rethinking time in developmental and life-course criminology

The findings presented show substantial continuity with the core theoretical vocabulary of life-course criminology, while also revealing significant and theoretically consequential variations in how that vocabulary must be applied once time is treated as an object of analysis rather than as a backdrop. This section synthesises them around five cross-cutting theoretical reframing the idea of time.

From isolated non-normative transition to systemic biographical compression

Elder’s (1994) concept of the non-normative transition was formulated to capture individual events that fall outside an otherwise normative sequence. The findings indicate that, under conditions of accumulated structural adversity, what is observed is not an isolated event out of sequence but a systemic chaining of compressed transitions that reinforce one another within narrow temporal windows. This, in turn, suggests that the conceptual apparatus of transition and turning point, originally built to operate at the level of a single event, requires an additional level of analysis -biographical compression as a group-level pattern- to account for trajectories in which irregularity constitutes the structural norm rather than the individual exception. This is not a minor terminological adjustment: for populations marked by extreme poverty and institutional weakness, the very distinction between non-normative and normative timing may need to be historicised and relativised to the population under study, instead of being treated as a fixed calendar against which any life course,

anywhere, can be measured. Whereas Elder's original formulation implicitly assumes a population for whom off-schedule transitions are the exception against a stable normative backdrop, the present findings describe a population for whom that backdrop is itself absent, such that measuring "how untimely" a given transition is against a population-level norm risks obscuring the more analytically important fact of systemic compression.

This move also finds classical sociological support. Durkheim's (1912/1995) argument that temporal categories are themselves collective representations – produced by and specific to a group's shared rhythms, rather than individual cognitive properties– supports treating biographical compression as a property of a population's structural position rather than as an aggregation of individual deviations from a universal clock.

From timing as chronological placement to timing as resource-relational contingency

If the same event –a parent's release from prison, most vividly, but also parenthood in the wider corpus this study draws on– can open or close a pathway toward desistance or further escalation depending on the relational and material resources available at the moment it occurs, then timing cannot be adequately theorised as a property of chronological age or sequence alone. It must be theorised relationally: as a function of the intersection between an event and the structural resources that allow it to be sustained. This directly extends the critique that Di Marco, Sandberg and Fondevila (2025) have levelled at the classical hooks-for-change literature generalising it from parenthood specifically to the turning-point concepts as such: family reunification, school transitions, and the other events life-course theory has treated as generically protective or disruptive are better understood as events whose valence is assigned, case by case, by the resource context in which the land.

This reframing has an anthropological antecedent that sharpens its theoretical stakes. Bourdieu's (1977) analysis of tempo in Kabyle social practice shows that the right moment to act is never a chronological given but a practical competency– part of the habitus– unevenly distributed according to an actor's position in the structure of capital. Read in light of this study's findings, Bourdieu's analysis suggests that timing in the life course is not simply mis-measured by a chronological metric, it is, in his sense, a form of practical mastery that structural deprivation actively withholds these participants, which explains why the same event (a parent's release, a reunification) can be executed well by an actor and badly, or not at all, by another.

It follows that life-course models would need to incorporate the resource context surrounding an event as a constitutive variable of the turning-point concept itself and not as an external moderator layered onto an otherwise self-sufficient event-based model. In practical terms, this reframing also cautions against policies that treat certain milestones –reunification with children, marriage, employment, reintegration benchmarks– as inherently protective triggers for desistance, when their protective capacity depends on the very resources that are scarcest among the populations most in need of such interventions. On this account, promoting a life event as an intervention strategy without the material conditions required to sustain it may prove not only ineffective but counterproductive.

Structurally conditioned ambivalence as a temporal position

A further implication concerns the desistance-persistence binary that has organised much of the life-course literature. The predominant position across this corpus is neither desistance nor persistence but a structurally conditioned ambivalence, in which change is recognised as desirable yet perceived as contingent on resources that no actor guarantees. This is not merely an intermediate category between two poles, the findings suggest it possesses its own temporal logic, corresponding to neither psychological indecision nor to narrative failure, but to the most realistic available response to a structure of opportunity that offers no guarantee of change. This finding stands in tension with Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph's (2002) influential model, in which the subject's readiness is treated as the condition for seizing a turning point: the data here show sustained readiness, held over time, that does not translate into change because the surrounding environment does not provide the material support required to sustain it. Ambivalence, in other words, is not a failure of narrative agency but a temporally extended position produced by the mismatch between a subject's readiness and the timing of resource availability– a further way in which time and structure are inseparable in this dataset. This also complicates the agentification pattern in which participants such as Diego relocate structural causality onto individual choice: the coexistence of that self-blaming narrative move with a sustained, materially conditioned ambivalence are not opposites but may appear within the same account, at different points in a single interview.

Gender and the asymmetric temporality of entry and reflexivity

Although this study was not designed as a strictly comparative analysis, its roughly balanced sample of men and women allows the temporal patterns identified above to be read through a gendered lens, and the resulting picture is one of asymmetry rather than uniform difference. The pathway into crime shows more pronounced gender differentiation than the reflexive experience produced by incarceration itself: women's accounts are distinguished by the salience of the partner as a relational gateway into trafficking and by the centrality of sexual and intimate-partner violence as the single most heavily weighted biographical turning point, while men's accounts more often locate violence in the ambient, domestic register of a mother's exposure to it, instead of as turning point of their own. At the same time, other patterns cut across gender (neutralisation techniques, hedonistic appeal of a fast-paced criminal lifestyle, the absence of capital transferable to the formal labour market) suggesting that gender differentiates the timing and mechanism of entry into criminal trajectories more sharply than it differentiates the reflexive work performed once incarcerated. This asymmetry also lends itself to a temporal reading: it suggests that the resources whose presence or absence determines whether a given event opens or closes a pathway, are gendered in their distribution at the point of entry into trajectory but converge, to a greater extent, once incarceration imposes a broadly shared suspended temporality on men and women alike, a pattern that a purely event-based ungendered model of timing would be unable to capture.

Narrative time as integration: narrative identity across three temporal registers

Finally, the findings support treating narrative identity (Ricoeur, 1996) as the conceptual hinge between the structural and narrative accounts of time that have been developed separately here. The retrospective account of who one was, the account of who is in suspended present of incarceration and the prospective account of who one might still become (redemption narratives and structurally conditioned ambivalence discussed) are not three separate operations but a single temporal integration performed under structural constraint. The contribution this offers narrative criminology is thus not a new

concept but an empirical demonstration of how narrative identity is constructed in constant, unequal dialogue with the structural conditions of the surrounding environment: the repertoire of stories available for narrating a different future narrow in step with the material conditions of the subject's life. Redemption narratives, in this light, should not be understood as a purely discursive or cognitive capacity but as a resource that requires external structural conditions to be sustained over time; in their absence, the narrative tends to drift toward ambivalence rather than toward persistence in crime, a drift that the account of relational and suspended time offered here helps to explain in terms of its mechanisms rather than merely describe.

Conclusion

Drawing on a qualitative study of incarcerated men and women in Chile, this paper has argued that time in developmental and life-course criminology deserves treatment as a substantive and relational phenomenon rather than a neutral chronological backdrop. Three reframings follow from the data: non-normative transitions can constitute a systemic, compressed pattern rather than an isolated deviation, the timing principle should be understood as a relational property between events and the structural resources available to sustain them, rather than as an intrinsic property of chronological age, and incarceration, together with the losses and disclosures that often accompany it, produces a distinctive suspended temporality that reorganises how earlier transitions are narrated and how future ones become thinkable. A fourth, cross-cutting finding qualifies all three: gender shapes the timing and mechanism of entry into a criminal trajectory more sharply than it shapes the reflexive temporality of incarceration itself, a pattern that a purely event-based, ungended account of timing would not surface.

Together, these reframings suggest that trajectories shaped by conditions of extreme poverty, accumulated violence and weak institutional support cannot be adequately understood through models developed for radically different populations and contexts, and that the concepts developed by developmental and life-course criminology -however robust- require situated elaboration when applied to such lives. The contribution here is not the introduction of concepts unknown to the field, but the empirical demonstration, gender-balanced Latin American carceral setting that remains under-represented in the literature, of how those concepts operate once time itself is treated as something to be explained.

The study's qualitative, retrospective design is, however, also its principal limitation for a discussion of time: the temporal patterns identified here are reconstructed through narration produced at a single point in the life course -incarceration- rather than tracked longitudinally. Consequently, findings are subject to the recall and reconstruction biases inherent in retrospective biographical narration; they cannot establish, with the certainty afforded by a panel design, the precise temporal order among the transitions identified, nor can they rule out the possibility that the experience of incarceration itself has retrospectively reorganised the meaning attributed to earlier events. This limitation is, in fact, consistent with the constitutive narrative perspective the study adopts (Presser & Sandberg, 2015) though it does constrain any claim to establish causality in the strict sense. Future research combining biographical interviewing with prospective, longitudinal designs would allow the relational-timing argument proposed here to be tested against trajectories as they unfold rather than as they are recalled. Similarly, cross-national comparison, particularly across contexts with differing levels of institutional support a social protection, would help to determine how far the resource-relational reframing of timing extends beyond the Chilean carceral setting. Notwithstanding these limitations, the paper suggests that a genuinely rethought account of time in developmental and life-course criminology must to hold together what has traditionally been kept apart: the chronology of the life course and the structural conditions that make a given chronology liveable, tellable, or foreclosed.

Declarations

Author Contribution

L.Z did the all analysis and wrote the manuscript

Data Availability

The data are available upon request and with the permission of the University of Oslo where all the information is kept in its security system.

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