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Beyond 'What Works': How and why do people stop offending?

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Introduction

In contrast to the wide dissemination and considerable influence of the 'what works' literature (for example, McGuire 1995), research and scholarship around desistance from offending, as yet, has had a more muted impact on criminal justice social work policy and practice. Some argue that the 'what works' literature has tended, in varying degrees, to suggest a 'medical model of corrections' in which an appropriate remedy is systematically administered, at the right 'dosage', to 'treat' or 'cure' a well-defined symptom (Maruna 2000). Whereas this model can lead to a pre-occupation with finding out which 'treatment' or programme characteristics are associated with effectiveness, the desistance literature pursues a broader agenda; it offers not so much an exploration of *what* works in helping people to change as of *when, how and why* change occurs. These broader questions support an approach which recognises the complex personal, inter-personal and social contexts of 'criminal careers' and their termination; an approach which sits somewhat *more* easily than the medical or correctional model with many of the traditional concerns of social work with offenders (Drakeford and Vanstone 1996). If that were not reason enough to suggest that attention to this literature is long overdue, the more recent attention given by several researchers to exploring the relationships between intervention and desistance serves to underline the increasing importance and usefulness of this field of study as a vital resource for criminal justice social work policy and practice.

This briefing on desistance begins with a very short review of related theoretical perspectives before exploring some of the relationships between desistance, age and gender, motivation and attitudes, relationships and interventions. Finally, in conclusion, it offers some ideas about the practical implications of the literature reviewed.

Theoretical Perspectives

Maruna (2000) identifies three broad theoretical perspectives in the desistance literature. *Maturational reform theories* have the longest history and are based on the links between age and certain criminal behaviours, particularly street crime. *Social bonds theories* suggest that ties to family, employment or educational programmes in early adulthood explain changes in criminality across the life course. Where these ties exist, they create a stake in conformity, a reason to 'go straight'. Where they are absent, offenders have less to lose from continuing to offend. *Narrative theories* have emerged from more qualitative research which stresses the significance of subjective changes in the person's sense of self and identity, reflected in changing motivations, greater concern for others and more consideration of the future.

Maruna (2000) argues that none of the more general desistance theories has offered much specific assistance to practitioners as to what they should actually do to encourage desistance. However, a corresponding problem around seeking to find ways to interpret and use research in policy and practice arises in connection with the better-known 'what works' research, since:

> '[b]y concentrating almost exclusively on the question of "what works", offender rehabilitation research has largely ignored questions about *how* rehabilitation works, *why* it works with some clients and why it fails with others' (Maruna 2000 p12).

Maruna (2000) agues that desistance research can and should redress these deficits by identifying the 'natural' process of reform and helping in the design of interventions that can enhance or complement spontaneous efforts to desist. Recognising the limitations of each form of research (desistance and rehabilitation) on its own, Maruna (2000) proposes a marriage of the two; with the desistance research's focus on the success stories of those that desist offering an 'individual-level view' that, in partnership with the rehabilitation literature's identification of general practices that seem successful, can better inform understandings of how people change, and how they can be assisted to change. The desistance research studies reviewed below begin to explore some key aspects of this 'individual-level view'.

Age, Gender and Desistance

McIvor, Jamieson and Murray's (2000) Scottish study explored desistance and persistence amongst three groups of young people aged 14-15, 18-19 and 22-25. They conducted interviews with a total of 75 'desisters' (43 male and 32 female) and 109 young people (59 male and 50 female) who were still offending or had done so recently.

McIvor *et al* (2000) discovered some age related differences concerning desistance. In the youngest age group, desistance for both boys and girls was associated with the real or potential consequences of offending and with growing recognition that offending was pointless or wrong. Young people in the middle age group similarly related their changing behaviour to increasing maturity, often linked to the transition to adulthood and related events like securing a job or place at college or university, or entering into a relationship with a partner or leaving home. For the oldest group, 'desistance was encouraged the assumption of family responsibilities, especially among young women, or by a conscious lifestyle change' (p9).

In general, the young women tended to attribute their decisions to desist to the assumption of parental responsibilities, whereas the young men focussed on personal choice and agency. Amongst persisters, girls and young women were more often keen *to be seen* as desisters, perhaps reflecting societal disapproval of female offending. McIvor *et al* (2000) speculate that:

> 'Assigning the offending to the past rather than acknowledging it as a current or future reality may enable young women to better cope with the tensions that may arise when, on the one hand, society encourages gender equality and, on the other, continues to double condemn young women who step beyond their traditional gender roles' (p9).

Graham and Bowling's (1995) study of young people aged 14-25 found similar gender differences. They noted a clear association between the transition from adolescence to adulthood and desistance from offending among young women. Young men, in contrast, were less likely to achieve independence and those that did leave home, formed partnerships and had children, were no more likely to desist than those that did not. Graham and Bowling (1995) speculate that life transitions:

> 'only provide *opportunities* for change to occur; its realisation is mediated by individual contingencies. Males may be less inclined to grasp, or be able to take advantage of such opportunities, as females' (p65).

More recent studies have revised this conclusion to some extent; suggesting that similar processes of change do indeed occur for (some) males but that they seem to take longer to 'kick-in'; positive effects of the assumption of responsibilities in and through intimate relationships and employment are more notable in men aged 25 and over (Flood-Page et al 2000, Farrall and Bowling 1999, Uggen and Kruttschnitt, 1998). Thus, it seems that young men take longer to grasp the opportunities for change that these life transitions provide.

In Graham and Bowling's (1995) study, only two factors seemed to be positively associated with desistance for males in the 16-25 age range: firstly, their perception that their school work was above average, and, secondly, continuing to live at home. It may be that continuing to live at home is associated with desistance because of relatively positive

relationships with parents and, as a result, spending less time with delinquent peers. Failure to desist among young men seemed to be best explained by three sets of risk factors: a high frequency of prior offending, continued contact with delinquent peers, heavy drinking and controlled drug use.

Attitudes, Motivation and Desistance

McIvor et al's (2000) study notes that 'for older respondents, who may have become more entrenched in patterns of offending and drug use, desistance was rarely considered to be an immediate or achievable goal' (p9). The significance of this finding is underlined by Burnett's (2000) study of efforts to desist amongst 130 adult property offenders released from custody. She noted that whilst 8 out of 10, when interviewed pre-release, wanted to 'go straight', 6 out of 10 subsequently reported re-offending post-release. Burnett (2000) noted that, for many, the intention to be law-abiding was provisional in the sense that it did not represent a confident prediction; only 1 in 4 reported that they would definitely be able to desist. Importantly, Burnett (2000) discovered that those who were most confident and optimistic about desisting had greatest success in doing so. For the others, the 'provisional nature of intentions reflected social difficulties and personal problems that the men faced' (p14).

Burnett (2000) delineates three categories of *desisters*. The 'non-starters' adamantly denied that they were 'real criminals' and, in fact, had fewer previous convictions than the others. For the 'avoiders', keeping out of prison was the key issue. They appeared to have decided that the costs of crime outweighed the benefits. The 'converts', however, were:

> 'the most resolute and certain among the desisters. They had found new interests that were all-preoccupying and overturned their value system: a partner, a child, a good job, a new vocation. These were attainments that they were not prepared to jeopardize or which over-rode any interest in or need for property crime' (Burnett 2000, p14).

Burnett (2000) notes that simply classifying the men as persisters or desisters 'misrepresents the switching, vacillating nature of desisting from offending' (p15). Most were ambivalent towards crime and, in consequence, desisting seemed like a protracted 'back and forth' or 'zigzag' process.

Bringing these studies together, the research on factors associated with desistance is neatly summarised in Farrall's (2002) account, which stresses the significance of the relationships between what might be termed 'objective' changes in the offender's life and his or her 'subjective' assessment of the value or significance of these changes:

> '… the desistance literature has pointed to a range of factors associated with the ending of active involvement in offending. Most of these factors are related to acquiring 'something' (most commonly employment, a life partner or a family) which the desister *values* in some way and which initiates a *re-evaluation* of his or her own life…' (p11 – emphases added).

In some senses, this characterisation of desistance marries the three theoretical perspectives above; desistance resides somewhere in the interfaces between developing personal maturity, changing social bonds associated with certain life transitions, and the individual subjective narrative constructions which offenders build around these key events and changes. It is not just the events and changes that matter; it is what these events and changes *mean* to the people involved. Some of the existing research studies exploring the relationships between intervention and desistance offer some important insights concerning how practitioners can work with and through these critical interfaces to support change.

Interventions, Relationships and Desistance

Rex's (1999) research addresses the features of probation relationships and how they come to exert positive influence. Her research involved interviews with 21 probation officers and 60 of their probationers. One quarter of the sample was women. While her research methodology did not enable her to determine whether the offenders that she interviewed had, in fact, desisted, they provided considerable insights into the role of probation in their reported processes of change.

Those that attributed changes in their behaviour to probation supervision described it as *active* and *participative*. Probationers conveyed the sense of being engaged through negotiation in a partnership. Given their recognition both of the need to *sustain* a decision to desist and of the possibility of relapse, probationers seemed more willing to 'embark' on desistance where they felt committed to and engaged in the supervisory relationship. In turn, '[t]his engagement seemed to be generated by the commitment, both personal and professional, shown by workers' (Rex 1999, p371). The 'mechanism' by which some probationers come to accept probation officers as role models, Rex (1999) suggests, may rely on 'the sense of obligation which the probation officers' support and encouragement seem to generate in

probationers' (p378). She found that as many as half of the probationers she interviewed revealed feelings of *personal* loyalty and accountability towards their supervisors.

In supervision, probationers could discern and appreciate efforts to improve their *reasoning and decision-making*. However, attempts to exert influence through cognitive approaches had to 'carry conviction in their eyes if they were to be effective' (p373). This conviction depended on the personal and professional commitment from workers discussed above. Furthermore, attempts to address cognitive skills seemed likely to be insufficient alone. Probationers valued guidance in their personal and social problems at least as often. Rex (1999) summarises this aspect of work as *strengthening social ties*. Significantly in this context, younger men trying to establish independence sought practical help, whereas women and other male probationers were keen to receive problem-solving advice so that they *themselves* could resolve practical problems.

Reinforcing pro-social behaviour was another prominent feature of probationers' accounts of positive supervision. Probationers could identify advice in this regard as evidence of concern for them *as people*, and 'were motivated by what they saw as a display of interest in their well-being' (Rex 1999, p375). Notably in this context, such encouragement seemed especially important for younger people involved in recidivist offending. Previous research in Scotland by Ditton and Ford (1994) has similarly suggested that persistent young offenders might need to be 'won over' by persistent workers to change their behaviour. In this regard, Rex (1999) found some evidence that probationers were more willing to accept guidance than probation officers were to be directive, so long as the former could understand the latter's direction as evidence of concern expressed within an engaging relationship.

Though it does not draw directly on desistance research, perhaps the best-known model of intervention focussed on the supervisory relationship, rather than on the features of a given intervention programme, is that developed in Australia by Chris Trotter (1999). Many aspects of Trotter's (1999) 'pro-social modelling' will be familiar to social work staff from other related methods. Its central principles include:

- **Role clarification**: involving frequent and open discussions about roles, purposes, expectations, the use of authority, negotiable and non-negotiable aspects of intervention and confidentiality
- **Pro-social modelling and reinforcement**: involving the identification, reward and modelling of behaviours to be promoted and the identification, discouragement and confrontation of behaviours to be changed
- **Problem solving**: involving the survey, ranking and exploration of problems, goal setting and contracting, the development of strategies and ongoing monitoring
- **Relationship**: involving the worker being open and honest, empathic, able to challenge and not minimise rationalisations, non-blaming, optimistic, able to articulate the client's and family members' feelings and problems, using appropriate self-disclosure and humour.

Trotter (1996) trained 12 probation officers in this approach and followed up 104 of their clients. He compared the outcomes for this experimental group with outcomes for a control group of 157 probation clients. Clients in the experimental group were subsequently significantly more likely to report that their problems were reduced and their re-offence rates were also significantly lower. Among the principles, the use of pro-social modelling was most consistently, strongly and significantly correlated with lower offence and imprisonment rates. The model was *most* effective with young, high-risk, violent and drug-using offenders.

Trotter's (1999) model is important for two main reasons. Firstly, although it would be possible to conceive of pro-social modelling as a form of individualised programme, it is perhaps better described as a *style* of or approach to practice. Trotter's work suggests therefore that we can conceive of styles and approaches and not merely specific programmes as being evidence-based and effective. Secondly, Trotter's (1999) research and his model directs attention to workers' qualities as well as being about the characteristics of specific programmes. Recently, Trotter (2000) has produced evidence to suggest that among staff working in community corrections in Australia, those with a social work background were more likely to learn and make use of pro-social modelling and, in turn, to produce lower rates of reconviction. In line with Rex's (1999) findings, Trotter (1996, 2000) suggests that this might be about possession of the *social work* skills and qualities required to achieve genuinely collaborative problem solving. These findings seem particularly ironic given developments in England and Wales which have divorced probation from social work in terms of professional education.

The Social Context of Desistance

Thought these lessons about working relationships and approaches to intervention are clearly important, the desistance research suggests that interventions must be seen within the wiioder social contexts both of offending and desistance. Farrall (2002) explored the progress or lack of progress towards desistance achieved by a group of 199 probationers.

Over half of the sample evidenced progress towards desistance. Farrall (2002) found that desistance could be attributed to specific interventions by the Probation Officer only in a few cases, although help with finding work and mending damaged family relationships appeared particularly important. Desistance seemed to relate more clearly to the probationers' motivations and to the social and personal contexts in which various obstacles to desistance were addressed. Importantly, Farrall does not conclude that probation does not work:

> 'The answer to the question of whether probation works is a qualified 'yes'. In many cases the work undertaken whilst on probation was of little *direct* help to many of the probationers, however the *indirect* impact of probation (i.e. naturally occurring changes in employment, accommodation and personal relationships) was of greater significance' (Farrall, 2002, p213).

Farrall (2002) argues that interventions themselves and evaluations of them should therefore pay greater heed to contexts in which they are situated. After all, 'social circumstances and relationships with others are *both* the object of the intervention and the medium through which… change can be achieved' (ibid: p212). Necessarily, this requires that interventions be focussed not solely on the individual person and his or her perceived 'deficits'. As Farrall (2002) notes, the problem with interventions based on such shaky criminological foundations is that while they can build *human capital,* for example, in terms of enhanced cognitive skills or improved employability, they cannot generate the *social capital* residing in relationships that facilitate or produce participation and inclusion. Vitally, it is social capital that is necessary to encourage desistance. It is not enough to build *capacities* for change where change depends on *opportunities* to exercise capacities:

> '…the process of desistance is one that is produced through an interplay between individual choices, and a range of wider social forces, institutional and societal practices which are beyond the control of the individual' (Farrall and Bowling, 1999, p261).

For Farrall, this necessitates a re-thinking both of 'what works' and of practice. He suggests that practice should be focussed not simply on 'offence-related factors' but on 'desistance-related factors'. An offence focus must, of course, be necessary and appropriate given that, within any justice context, it is offending which occasions and justifies intervention. However, being narrowly offence-focussed might in some senses tend to accentuate precisely those aspects of an offender's history, behaviour and attitudes which intervention aims to diminish. It may also tend towards reducing the problem to one of individual 'malfunctioning'. Being desistance-focussed, by contrast, implies a focus on the purpose and aspiration of the intervention rather than on the 'problem' that precipitates it. It tends towards recognising the broader social contexts and conditions required to support change. Thus, where being offence-focussed encourages practice to be retrospective and individualised, being desistance-focussed allows practice to become prospective and contextualised.

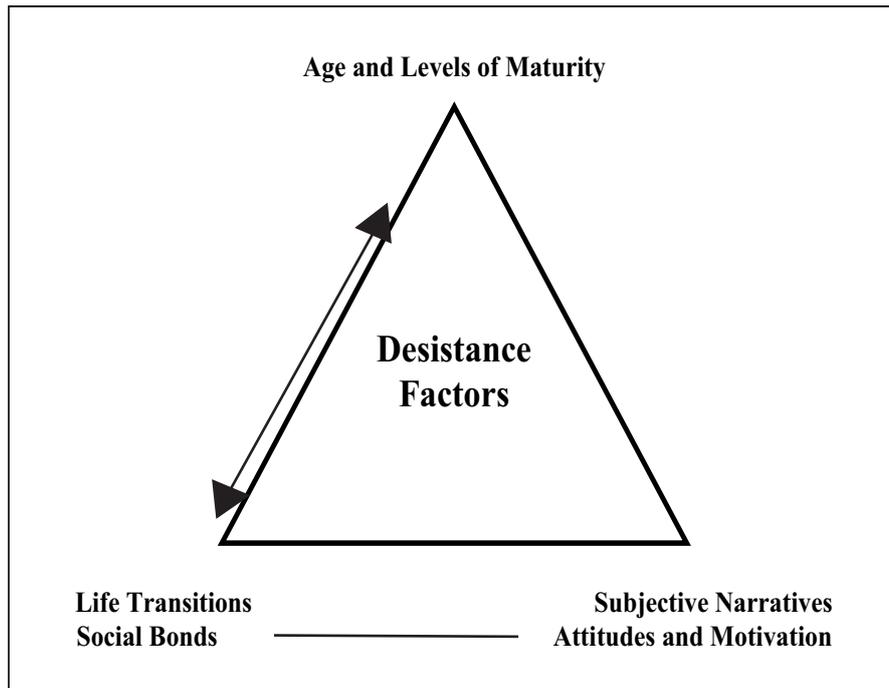**Conclusions: Desistance-Focussed Practice**

What might desistance-focussed practice look like? This concluding section briefly suggests how such practice might be developed, firstly in terms of assessment and planning, and secondly, in terms of engagement, intervention and evaluation.

Assessment and Planning

One of the general messages from the research is that desistance-focussed assessment (and intervention) would, of necessity, be thoroughly individualised. The age and gender related differences in both persistence and desistance reported above attest to the need for practice that sensitively and thoughtfully *individualises* generalised messages about effective interventions. This need is unsurprising since although there are certain commonalities, for example, among young people involved in persistent offending, the categorisation of their characteristics, needs and deeds in large-scale studies tends to conceal their differences (McNeill and Batchelor 2002). From the outset in desistance-focussed assessment and intervention, employing approaches to and styles of practice that not only accommodate but also value and exploit that diversity seems necessary.

What might be some of the parameters of this individualised assessment? It was noted above that the reasons for desistance seem to reside somewhere in the interfaces between developing personal maturity, changing social bonds associated with certain life transitions, and the individual subjective narrative constructions which offenders build around these key events and changes. This suggests that practitioners should engage in mapping out these differing interfaces on a case-by-case basis. Figure One below indicates the range of issues and relationships to be addressed.

Figure One: Constructing Desistance

Age and Levels of Maturity

Desistance Factors

**Life Transitions
Social Bonds**

**Subjective Narratives
Attitudes and Motivation**

This might require, firstly, an exploration, in partnership with the offender, of each of these three discrete areas. While such work will sound very familiar to practitioners, the difference might be that, in each of the three areas, the worker and the offender would work to make explicit how, in what ways and to what extents the three factors would serve to support or hinder desistance for the individual concerned.

In addition to exploring the three points of the triangle, the more complex and important subsequent task would be elaborating the inter-relationships *between* the three areas (represented by the arrows in Figure One). If there were consonance between the three areas such that all are 'pulling together' in the direction of desistance, then a reinforcing support plan might be relatively straightforward to construct. If all aspects were consonant in the direction of continued offending, by contrast, this would suggest both implications for risk assessment and, if community supervision is appropriate, the need for an intensive and multi-faceted intervention. If, as is perhaps most likely, there were some dissonance within and between the three areas, then the task becomes one of reinforcing the 'positives' and challenging the 'negatives'. For example, an offender might have formed a positive relationship with a supportive partner who discourages offending, but remain wedded to aspects of his or her identity as an offender (perhaps within a peer group). In such a case, the worker might work with both partners to build on the strengths of the relationship (reinforcing its role in re-forming identity and values), while working directly with the offender on issues of attitude, motivation and on ways and means of dissociating from the peer group.

Engagement, Intervention and Evaluation

The works of Burnett (1992, 2000), Rex (1999) and Trotter (1996, 1999, 2000) direct us towards the crucial significance of engaging worker-client relationships. Clearly, working to promote change within the context of ambivalent and shifting 'commitments' to desistance is highly complex and challenging. In this context, it is hardly surprising to find that optimism, trust, and loyalty are essential features of effective relationships; relationships which should also be active, participative, purposeful, 'pro-social' and explicit in their negotiation of roles, boundaries and mutual expectations.

If and when such relationships can be established, being desistance-focussed in terms of intervention would require different approaches in different cases. In general, drawing on the 'what works' research, part of the worker's task would be to seek to build individual capacities or 'human capital'. However, the discussion above also suggests that it would be at least as important to work to access and support opportunities for change, for example around accommodation and employment, and, through these opportunities, to develop the individual's 'social capital'. This underlines the importance of advocacy as a key professional task and skill. Similarly, from the research literatures around desistance and around rehabilitation, it also seems clear that, particularly in working with young people involved in offending, developing effective methods of working with families would be essential (Graham and Bowling 1995, Utting and

Vennard 2000). Whether within or without families, finding and supporting living situations that support processes of desistance through positive relationships with 'significant others' seems vital.

Finally, the effectiveness literature suggests that as well as *using* research evidence, effective interventions *generate* research evidence. Thorough monitoring and evaluation are clearly implicated as being of key significance in developing effective practice. The complexities of these tasks should not be underestimated (McNeill 2000, Merrington 1998) but making the 'logic' of the intervention explicit - stating why the plan is designed as it is as well as how and why it is expected to achieve change - is only the start of a process that must be supported by adequate resources and rigorous review. The brief outline offered above concerning desistance-focussed assessment ought to assist in this process. In this model, a clearly articulated plan for promoting desistance would also represent, in terms of monitoring and evaluation, a hypothesis concerning what work is required with *this* offender in *this* case to bring about reduction or cessation of offending; *why* that work is necessary and appropriate; *how* it will be carried out; and what tools can be used to measure progress towards change.

The desistance research also underlines why a commitment to seeking the views of people involved in offending and their families is as important as more quantifiable indicators of progress or 'success'. Only with such qualitative data can more comprehensive understandings of 'what works' and how and why it works be developed (Farrall 2002, p3-4). To these methodological concerns we might add ethical reasons for seeking and heeding the views of offenders. If, as seems to be the case, embarking on the journey towards desistance is perilous and difficult for the people concerned, then we need to learn more *from them* about what might persuade them to desist and about the support that they need to see their decisions through.

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