

Lifelines: Desistance, Social Relations, and Reciprocity

Beth Weaver

University of Strathclyde

Fergus McNeill

University of Glasgow

Author Note

Beth Weaver, School of Social Work and Social Policy, University of Strathclyde

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Beth Weaver, School of Social Work and Social Policy, University of Strathclyde, Lord Hope Building L6 Glasgow, United Kingdom, beth.weaver@strath.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper draws on the life stories of a friendship group of men in their 40s who offended together in their youth and early adulthood. By exploring these inter-related narratives, we reveal individual, relational and structural contributions to the desistance process, drawing on Donati's (2011) relational sociology. In examining these men's social relations, this paper demonstrates the central role of friendship groups, intimate relationships, families of formation, employment and religious communities in change over the life course. It shows how, for different individuals, these relations triggered reflexive evaluation of their priorities, behaviours and lifestyles but with differing results. However, despite these differences, the common theme of these distinct stories is that desistance from crime was a means of realising and maintaining the men's individual and relational concerns, with which continued offending became (sometimes incrementally) incompatible. In the concluding discussion, we explore some of the ethical implications of these findings, suggesting that work to support desistance should extend far beyond the typically individualised concerns of correctional practice and into a deeper and inescapably moral engagement with the (re)connection of the individual to social networks that are restorative and allow people to fulfil the reciprocal obligations on which networks and communities depend.

Keywords: social relations, desistance, corrections, restorative justice, reciprocity.

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In recent years theories of desistance from crime (exploring how and why people stop and refrain from offending) have been much developed, discussed and debated, not just in relation to their various interconnected explanations of the process but also in relation to their implications for penal policy and practice. Underlying this developing scholarship lies an aspiration and an expectation that better understandings of desistance can and should enable the development of better approaches to punishment, rehabilitation and reintegration and thus to the creation of safer and fairer societies.

In what follows, Donati's relational theory of sociology is presented as a new theoretical lens through which to conceptualise processes of change. We illustrate this through an analysis of the life-stories of a friendship group, revealing the centrality of *social relations* in the desistance process. Social relations are those bonds maintained between people that constitute their reciprocal orientations towards each other and Donati considers them key to understanding society and social change.

Social relations cannot be reduced to the influences of one person on another (and thus to *interpersonal* effects). Understanding *how* social relations work requires an examination of 'the effect of their *interaction* (the behaviour that none of the actors [individually] 'brings' to the relation, but which results from their mutual conditioning of each other' (Donati 2011: 126) [emphasis added]). Each relation has irreducible properties arising from the reciprocal orientations of those involved. Crucially, it is the practice of reciprocity (or exchange) that generates and re-generates the bond of the relationship. Thus individuals-in-relation reflexively orientate themselves to the maintenance of 'relational goods' (such as trust, solidarity, loyalty and mutual concern). Being in social relations produces these goods, which are reliant on enduring bonds. That said, social relations can also produce 'relational bads' (such as domination, fear and mistrust).

Importantly, Donati (2011) also develops a relational theory of reflexivity, arguing that reflexivity is relational insofar as it is shaped by the networks in which it emerges. Individual action is guided not only by individual concerns but also by the social relations that matter most to people. In this context, compromises are deliberated over and decided upon in order to sustain these relationships and maintain relational goods. People thus make reciprocal adjustments or modifications to their behaviours as an outcome of *relational* reflexivity. In this way, social relations can motivate individuals to behave in a way that they might not otherwise have done.

Just as interactions take place in a relational context, social relations themselves are embedded in a structural and cultural context. How reciprocity is enacted then, and what it entails, will depend on the nature of the relationship, the form of social relation and the social and cultural context in which it is rooted (Donati 2014). The conditioning influence of the structural/cultural context works through shaping the situations of social relations and social actors; for example, influencing the accessibility of resources or the prevalence of beliefs that shape the relations in which people find themselves. This shaping operates such that some courses of action are impeded and discouraged, while others are facilitated and encouraged (Donati 2011). Conditioning structures can also be understood as the sets of relational rules prescribing how people should behave towards each other, according to the norms that the context prescribes; norms which the individual must negotiate reflexively and in a relational context (Donati 2011, Pers. Comm.). So, social structures influence both individuals and their actions and social relations and their interactions. But individual actions and relational interactions also produce outcomes so as to effect either structural elaboration ('morphogenesis') or reproduction ('morphostasis'). In this context desistance from crime represents a form of structural elaboration (development or change), while persistence in criminal behaviour represents a form of structural reproduction (or stasis).

The study reported in this paper aimed to reveal the (interconnected) contributions of individuals and social relations to participation in offending and to the accomplishment of desistance. By so doing, it sheds new light on the centrality of social relations in the desistance process. In the concluding discussion, given the focus of this special issue, we focus on some of the normative or ethical implications of the analysis for criminal justice policies and practice.

Method¹

Participants

The study involved the analysis of the life stories of a friendship group of six men in their 40s who offended together in their youth and early adulthood (Weaver 2013a). The table below provides an overview of the trajectory of their offending careers.

[Insert table here]

Participants were recruited using a method of snowball sampling; the researcher had prior contact with a member of the group. The six men were selected precisely because they were part of a “natural” peer group, and as such have not been selected from a wider pool or category of possible respondents. The inclusion/exclusion criteria were simply that the participants were known to the initial contact and comprised members of the group. Participants occupy a shared age range and the central characteristics of the group include shared social and geographical origins and collective involvement in persistent offending behaviour.

Measures

¹ A fuller account of the methodology and results detailed in Weaver (2013a) are available from the first author on request.

In taking not the individual but the social relation as a central unit of analysis, this study explored the relative contributions of individual actions, social relations and social structures to the process of desistance. The data was collected using a qualitative, retrospective life-story method, which was deemed the most appropriate method for exploring the subjective aspects of individual and collective experiences and their interactions (Atkinson 1998). The life-story interview involved participants in between two and four interviews, which lasted an average of five hours in total, with the shortest lasting for three hours, and the longest lasting for eight hours. Interviews were recorded (with permission), fully transcribed and coded into emergent and superordinate themes using the 'Interpretive Phenomenological Analytic' method (IPA) (Smith and Osborn 2003, Smith et al 2009).

Procedure

IPA was selected as a method of analysis because it facilitates a finely grained data analysis, oriented to a detailed exploration as to how participants make sense of their personal and social world. The analytic focus is on the meanings that particular experiences and events hold for participants. The approach is phenomenological in that it involves detailed examination of the participant's life-world in its own terms. It is interpretive in its recognition of the researcher's engagement in a double hermeneutic which examines how participants make sense of their worlds (Smith et al. 2009). IPA is also idiographic in that it is particularly suitable for small sample sizes which enable the researcher to analyse and reveal the experiences of each participant.

Themes were generated inductively during the analysis of the individual cases. The frequency with which each individual drew on key social relations prompted a theoretical analysis during the process of cross-case analysis and it was at this point that the utility of

Donati's ideas became apparent. This remains consistent with the hermeneutic phenomenological underpinnings of IPA which were reflected in the dynamic relationship between the comparison of individual life-stories and Donati's relational sociology, the latter providing a theoretical framework through which to refract the 'second-order analysis' (Smith et al. 2009: 166). The process of analysis yielded four superordinate themes: The Relational Context of Offending; Experience of Punishment (for two participants only); Roles/Religiosity, Reflexivity, Relationality and Desistance; and The Meanings and Outcomes of Work. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss each of these themes as they manifested in and across individual life stories. Rather, in what follows, we present the recurrent elements of the change process as they emerge *across* the life stories to illuminate the individual, relational and structural contributions to the desistance process.

This study examines the life-stories of a small group of men in a specific social and cultural context, and in a particular historical period. We therefore make no claims as the statistical generalizability of the findings to other populations in other places and times. Nonetheless, we suspect that analytical generalizability is possible; although structural and cultural contexts of individual actions and relational interactions will vary, the need to attend to the relational in understanding and supporting desistance seems likely to be universal.

Results

The Dynamics² of Desistance

The group as context and interaction. The group ('the Del'), comprising sibling and friend relations, were born and raised in 'Coaston', a predominantly working class town in the west of Scotland. Various social histories of the era and area portray a dominant 'macho',

² The term 'dynamic' refers to a) the distinct elements of the change process and b) the processes through which desistance are enabled. It recognises thus the influence and interaction between the elements that contribute to desistance as well as the activity and change that occurs within and between those elements over time.

patriarchal culture manifest in heavy drinking and interpersonal violence, and underpinned by widespread frustration and socio-economic disadvantage (Damer 1990, Craig 2010).

Reminiscent of Willis' (1977) boys, the Del actively and self-consciously appropriated elements of an idealised configuration of hegemonic 'traditional' working class masculinity (Connell 2002) in their pursuit of status, respect and social recognition, influenced by and responsive to their structural, cultural and economic contexts. Their emergent gender identities and associated practices were interwoven with relational rules, influencing the kinds of bond generated between them and guiding the nature and form of their relationships, interactions and actions, which included acquisitive and violent crime.

The frequency and intensity of their association with each other afforded them a sense of belonging, recognition and solidarity and transformed their relationships into stronger, more reciprocal, fraternal relationships which served to ameliorate the marginality and powerlessness they experienced in other social spheres. Pahl (2000) argued that, characteristically, friends are viewed as freely chosen and the moral obligations they carry are less binding than those relating to kin ties. However, collectives comprising sibling and friend relations suffuse kin relations with the norms and expectations associated with the role of friendship, and vice versa, which forms a strong fraternal bond. All of the men interviewed had high expectations of their friendships in the group and were strongly invested in the maintenance of these relationships. The emergent relational goods of reciprocity, trust, equality, uncritical support, loyalty and solidarity for each other occurred frequently across accounts and manifested in specific expectations and behavioural obligations. For example, it was expected that you would support your friends if they were caught up in a violent incident.

Jed: Everybody looked after each other. I mean if I went out one night and got a doing, well Adam and the whole lot of them, Mark, Ben, James and all that would be

out the next night looking for them, the people who set about me. If Adam got a doing, we'd be looking for them. Nothing ever went unanswered.

The group encouraged collective participation in behaviours that individuals might not normally have undertaken alone, motivated by fear of 'losing face', status or the respect of their friends. The cycle of retributive inter-group violence to which this gave rise had the effect of perpetuating and exacerbating their collective offending, which incrementally led to increasingly restricted lives offering little choice or opportunity to be or do anything different (and hence to structural reproduction or 'morphostasis').

The group fragmented as a consequence of a violent and enduring intra-group feud, which escalated in frequency and intensity over a two-year period. Some people developed alternative social networks rather than align with one side or another. In the context of enduring economic and structural constraints in the West of Scotland, and as a means to escape the escalating violence, a number of the Del (hereafter the 'revised group') relocated to London to seize opportunities presented by the construction boom of the 1980s.

Adam (not interviewed) was the first of the revised group to escape to London and to access employment in steel-fixing. In Adam's case this was informed by a reflexive intention to desist and distance himself from the 'relational bads' (Donati 2011) emerging from the feud. His resolve was underpinned by his emotional connection to his spouse and a desire to maintain their emergent 'relational goods'; goods which continued offending and its outcomes threatened. Nonetheless, concerned to support his friends, Adam encouraged them to relocate and trained them in steel-fixing. Among those interviewed in this study, Jed, Seth and Jay followed him to London although others not interviewed, including the Smith brothers (Ben, Jim and James) and Mark, also moved with them. Adam's concern for his friends can be

construed as evidence of his application of reflexivity not simply to himself or to his individual social mobility but to his relationships. Having been a leader in the group, he now exercised leadership in a different way, consistent with Donati's (2011) concept of relational reflexivity. Re-establishing a revised and collaborative relational network in a new location facilitated the re-emergence of the relational goods of social trust, solidarity and social connectedness threatened by the feud, from which other ends, including new knowledge and skills, employment and economic resources, were derived as secondary emergent effects (Donati, 2006).

While economic and social changes to their structural contexts (in the form of employment opportunities) were enabled by the construction boom, the recognition and pursuit of such opportunities was also an expression of their individual and collective agency. However, the development of the necessary skills in steel-fixing, and their capacity to *access* these opportunities and settle in a new area emerged from the mutual and reciprocal exchange of support and resources among the revised group. The changes in their conditioning structures were thus the outcomes both of Adam's relational reflexivity and of the collaborative efforts and reflexivity of the revised group. The relocation offered *shared* opportunities for change.

However, the extent to which the move to London was initially apprehended as an opportunity for change varied across the group. Differing individual responses to these changes in their conditioning structures illustrate that the outcomes cannot be explained in terms of external forces exerting an exogenous or homogenous effect; rather, they reflect individuals' varying receptivity and response to these changes; responses that were reflexively mediated through the lens of their individual and relational concerns or priorities. For Jed, his initial motivation to abstain from offending was partly influenced by his desire to avoid London prisons where he had no prison-based networks that might ameliorate the

adversity of the prison experience. But regular employment and a steady income also eliminated the need to engage in acquisitive crime, which, for Jed, provoked a reflexive deliberation on the pros and cons of offending and the consequences of a jail sentence on the opportunities he had acquired, as well as provoking consideration of opportunities for an alternative lifestyle that had been previously unavailable to him:

Jed: I wasn't planning on stopping getting into bother... I just started thinking 'wait a minute I'm getting 5 or 600 pound a week here, I've got a cracking wee place to live, what the fuck am I wanting to get the jail for, you know what I mean?... You could see the bigger picture, you know, and you'd start thinking, 'oh I could make money down here without stealing it'.

Intimate relationships exerted a distinct change-promoting influence on the behaviour of some of those in the revised group and their lifestyle³. Generally, the acquisition of new relationships and associated social roles and practices acted in conjunction with an increasing disillusionment with their previous lifestyles and the threat continued offending potentially posed to these roles and relationships, to their shifting identities and to employment opportunities. However, these relationships, roles and practices exerted a significant influence not only on individual behaviour but also on the interactive dynamics of the revised group. The shifting priorities and concerns of individuals away from the group and towards their families of formation (and associated shifts in their behaviour) exerted a constraint on the behaviour of others, who found they had less support from their desisting peers for engagement in offending behaviour. This reflected a shift in the relational rules in this new context, to which they responded by modifying their behaviour, motivated by a desire to continue to support each other:

³ For a fuller discussion on the role of intimate relationships and families of formation of the change process, please see Weaver (2012) and Weaver (2013a)

Seth “When I came out of [prison] we went down to London and [Adam] got me work and when we went down there ... he'd stepped away fae [offending] and settled down with [Marie]... and he'd say to me about doing this or not doing that... It's almost as if [Adam] knew... what sort of... pressures would come up... and he could help me overcome that.”

Each individual's receptivity to the influence of their friends arose from the reciprocal bonds between them; in turn, what emerged from their interactions, combined resources and personal and relational reflexivity was a transformation in their conditioning structures and relational rules (morphogenesis).

The meanings and outcomes of work. Living and working in a new environment afforded the revised group an opportunity to engage in a wealth of new experiences and an opportunity to connect to different people, which, as Jay implied, contributed to an enhanced sense of agency and the ability to imagine himself and his relationships and prospects differently:

Jay: Going to London... opened up a whole new world because I had been cocooned up in here in [Coaston], in my relationships, my friendships... when I eventually moved it was just as if the blinkers were taken away... I met a whole different range of people and I knew that I could move away from [Coaston] and the life I was in and do things I could never have done before... I would say that was definitely a big turning point in my life.

Across the revised group, working in steel-fixing required the development of employment-based networks of ‘bridging social capital’ to access further work. Bridging

social capital involves establishing new social relations; these ties facilitate the reciprocal exchange of resources from one network to a member of another network and in this sense are linked to the development of broader identities and social mobility (Woolcock and Narayan 2000). Such social capital was a critical and instrumental means of access to further contractual work for the group. One person would obtain a contract for work and, as foreman, employ his friends and associates to carry out the work. In addition to sustaining employment, the development of new social relationships through work, comprising a diverse range of people, 'afforded a concrete way of enhancing one's own identity as a respectable person' (Giordano et al 2003: 311). Thus, members of the group developed constructive reputations as 'workers', which enabled access to further work.

Participation in regular employment at this stage provided the revised group with new weekly routines, new social relationships and employment-based networks, economic stability, and concrete opportunities for new experiences. Working together as a team became a definitive feature of the lifestyles among 'the revised group' which reinforced a sense of common purpose and which enabled the internalisation of identities, both as individuals and as a collective, in which participation in work occupied a central place (Rhodes 2008).

Seth: It's not like you just had to... not see people... there was people about you that were wanting the same things, so that helped. We all... got to that point where we wanted out of it round about the same time... we all stayed pretty close and we were working together and living together at different times.

In the early stages, working together in steel-fixing represented an important means of re-establishing a sense of identification and belonging among the revised group, which, in view of their shifting priorities, practices and relational dynamics, further exerted a

constraining effect on individuals' offending behaviour. While employment did not directly trigger desistance for the revised group, it assisted all of them to sustain it in the context of broader enabling shifts in their conditioning structures. In turn, these relations imbued their participation in work with meaning. The chains of meanings that characterise a given social relation are 'the complicated tissue of relations between culture, personality, social norms' and lived experiences (Donati 2011: 130). What emerged across the individual stories was the continuing centrality of the men's internalised configuration of hegemonic 'traditional' working class masculinity (Connell 2002) in influencing their expectations of their marital relationships and their associated gender roles, and thus the shape and form of this social relation.

Jed: That's the way we were all brought up and that's the way women see men... it was always your father went out to work and your mother done all the house work and the men had to just go out there, do your work, come in and fling the money on the table... You felt great then. I've done my bit.

For Seth, Jed and Harry, in particular, the role of breadwinner or provider was, to varying degrees, a dominant component of each of their adult masculine (and desisting) identities; one that simultaneously provided a conventional means of accomplishing masculinity and social recognition. Employment therefore represents an important means through which these aspects of one's identity might be realised and recognised (Rhodes 2008).

However, the form and shape that a relation takes is not pre-determined nor permanently fixed but differs between individuals-in-relation and over time depending on how they personify and interiorise the relation. To illustrate, Jed's eventual separation from

his partner and their children, and thus the loss of this social role and identity, rendered his subsequent participation in work meaningless to him. The economic outcomes that had, in his late twenties, been a motivation to sustain employment no longer satisfied him; participation in employment came to represent nothing more than engagement in a purposeless and cyclical routine that generated money that he didn't know what to do with. This suggests that an individual's priorities and relational concerns have a significant bearing on the meaning and outcomes of work.

A significant constraint emerging for both Seth and Jed, albeit manifesting differently, related to the hard drinking, hardworking culture of the steel-fixing industry. The pub performs an important social function as the primary social space for men in the construction industry, who are working away from their families and hometowns, living in crowded, often insubstantial, accommodation and in unfamiliar geographical locations (Tilki 2006). For Seth, while the hard drinking, hardworking culture enabled the maintenance of social relations within his working environment, it interfered with his capacity to sustain direct family involvement and heralded his return to prolonged episodes of binge-drinking which placed a strain on his marriage. Similarly, following the conclusion of his relationship with his partner, Jed's co-residence and association with similarly situated men in the construction industry contributed to a prolonged period of chaotic alcohol use; one that ultimately threatened his health and constrained his capacity to continue working.

Across the men's narratives, the constraints and limitations on the otherwise constructive outcomes of participation in employment variously cohered around the degree to which employment created an environment of and resource for social recognition. Intensive association with a friendship group, however formed, encouraged collective participation in, or an amplification of, behaviours that individuals might not normally undertake alone, motivated by fear of losing the respect of their friends (or colleagues). The human need to

mutually and reciprocally relate to other people ‘involves feeling connected (or feeling that one belongs in a social milieu)’ (Vallerand 1997: 300). For Jed and Seth, their desire for recognition - to fit in and belong within a given social milieu - generated constraints in other areas of their lives. Therefore, while the social relation of employment can enable or support desistance, the relational space and social places of work can manifest as sites of recognition and misrecognition that are more or less enabling or constraining of change.

Faith communities and friendship groups. Following the fragmentation of the Del, both Jay and Evan (independently from each other) participated in drug use. Ultimately, their addiction and the lifestyle it engendered created the conditions that differently shaped and influenced their offending behaviour, lifestyles and subjective wellbeing. The pursuit of drugs became their primary concern. As an outcome of their increasing drug-related desperation, relational contexts and lifestyles, both Jay and Evan became progressively receptive to their friends’ faith-based interventions and testimonies of change. Their internalisation of the teachings of Pentecostal Christianity, influenced by their interactions with friends from the Del who had converted, ultimately shaped their identities, behaviours and lifestyles. In turn, this reshaped the sets of relations in which they were involved.

In the first year following Evan’s conversion to Christianity and subsequent release from custody, Peter (not interviewed) and Jay assumed what might be construed as an informal ‘circle of support’ in terms of socializing Evan into Pentecostal Christian values, beliefs and practices and providing a helpful and encouraging environment to reinforce his fledgling Christian identity. In so doing, this ‘helping collective’ role-modelled Pentecostal Christian identities and generated the relational goods (of love, friendship, devotion, caring) through which this process of re-socialisation was enabled. The process was underpinned by

Christian relational ethics which consign mutual responsibilities on each person for supporting and for taking responsibility for personal change.

Evan: “I had watched their lives and knew they were different... for the first year [post conversion]... they were always with me night and day, people like Peter and Jay... we would meet together... they almost sort of mentored me and gave me good advice... they were very influential in the early days”.

Religion encapsulates particular beliefs, values, attitudes and practices that, in conjunction with the relational ties formed through religious institutions, create a new world, and thus shape the conditioning structures for the convert to inhabit (Rambo 1993). In Pentecostal Christianity, converts refer to being ‘born again’ and this emerged as a dominant identity in both Evan and Jay’s narratives. The term ‘born-again’ represents the ‘displac[ement of] the relationship one had with the world and a former self, the person in the flesh. The moral identity is then constituted of a different kind’ (Bielo 2004: 277). For Jay, this was expressed through his immediate initiation of significant lifestyle changes:

Jay: I stopped overnight hanging with all my pals but I didnae feel pulled towards them and I didnae feel I had to pull myself back from them. I just thought I don’t like what they are doing. It’s not right to do it. So I just made a conscious choice not to go there. I met a lassie a couple of years later and she said ‘It was as if you’d died’... and I said ‘Well I did die. I died to my old life’ – and that’s the only way to describe it. When I became a Christian I stopped drink and drugs, swearing, watching the telly, offending, everything. I just stopped everything.

Jay's internal changes in his beliefs, values and attitudes were thus expressed in external lifestyle changes characterised by the relinquishment of what he had come to regard as his past sinful behaviours, in pursuit of a moral or 'good life'.

Some scholars suggest that being 'born-again' can threaten male identity, since it requires abandoning behaviours previously associated with masculinity (Brereton 1991, Gooren, 2010). However, van Klinken's research (2012) suggests that Pentecostal Christian males redefine masculinity through the exercise of self-control, self-discipline, the resistance of temptations and the assumption of responsibility for oneself and for others. Thus, in the process of being born again 'not only a new moral subject but a new male gendered subject is created, inspired by an alternative understanding of masculinity' (van Klinken 2012:225); one connected to notions of leadership, whether within the family or in Christian ministry.

Discussion

Social relations, desistance and normativity

The social relations that this study focused on were friendship groups, intimate relations and families of formation, employment and faith communities. What these social relations have in common is that they all incorporate shared expectations of reciprocity that imply degrees of interdependency. Those social relations that were most influential in supporting desistance were characterised by solidarity and subsidiarity or a sense of 'we-ness'. Put simply, subsidiarity is a way to supply the means of constructing 'we-ness' – a way to move resources to support and help the other without making him or her passive or dependent. It allows and assists the other to do what must be done to realise his or her priorities or aspirations. Subsidiarity cannot work without solidarity which means sharing a responsibility through reciprocity (Donati, 2009).

While key social relations have the capacity to influence, enable or constrain processes of change, it is the meanings and significance of the social relation to individuals-in-relation, and the emergent effects of their interactions, that are critical to understanding their contributions to desistance. Ultimately and crucially desistance emerged in this study not as an end in itself – as some studies tend to imply – but as a *means* – to, variously, realizing and maintaining the men’s individual and relational concerns. Offending became incompatible with these concerns.

In sum, the impact of a given social relation on individuals’ behaviour is attributable to the bonds maintained *between* people that constitute their reciprocal orientations towards each other; the emergent effects of their interactive dynamics; the interaction with and influence of other social relations within which individuals-in-relation participate; and the chains of meanings, or relational characteristics, that a given type of social relation, as opposed to another, entails for individuals (shaped by the internalized cultural, class or religious beliefs and the values they impute to it) who bring their own personal reflexivity to bear in a manner consistent with their ultimate concerns, goals or aspirations (Donati 2011). In simpler terms, our social relations shape our behaviours, our identities and our sense of belonging. It follows that social relations have a normative dimension; indeed, Donati’s discussion of relational ‘goods’, relational ‘bads’, reciprocity, solidarity and subsidiarity make this explicit.

Where previous discussions of desistance have attended to normative questions, they focus either on the virtues and vices of desisters (e.g. Bottoms and Shapland, 2011) or on the moral qualities of professional relationships that can encourage desistance (McNeill, 2006; Shapland, et al., 2012). What is missing in these accounts is an appreciation and elaboration of the (non-professional) relational contexts of offending and desistance, and of how these contexts are suffused with normative concerns linked to the character and obligations of

reciprocity in social groups. It seems to us that unless policymakers and practitioners engage constructively with these relational contexts their efforts to influence individual behaviours are likely to be seriously undermined.

Of course, one of the challenges that face criminal justice reformers is that both political and social reactions to people who have offended are often (and sometimes justifiably) characterised by anger and affront. Offending offends because and to the extent that it violates principles of mutual recognition, solidarity and respect, and the reciprocal social relations that these principles should permit and entail. Responding to such offence in punitive and exclusionary ways is understandable and perhaps sometimes even appropriate and necessary. Yet, if punishment has a *merely* punitive or vengeful aim, or if it is simply incapacitating, it is likely to have the effect of fracturing relations and weakening or severing natural norms of reciprocity. Desistance is likely to be better enabled through processes and responses that are restorative and allow people to fulfil their reciprocal obligation which implies re-establishing ‘the circuit of reciprocity’ (Donati 2009:227).

Putting this another way, while it is clear that offending requires a normative response (in order to express and reinforce values, reciprocity or solidarity), it is equally clear that there are many possible ways to communicate and affirm values. Most fundamentally, we can punish in ways that willfully damage individuals and their interests, or we can punish (or rehabilitate) in ways that elicit a more positive form of redress. The choices we make about and between these forms of penal power and the penal mechanisms we deploy in this respect are historically, sociologically and politically contingent.

These choices also have implications for the legitimacy of processes of punishment and rehabilitation, not least where they aim to support desistance (McNeill and Robinson, 2012). Indeed, one of us has recently argued (McNeill, 2012; 2014) that – even in states that

do retain a commitment to rehabilitation - we are too narrowly focused on supporting personal change, neglecting three other forms of rehabilitation; moral, social and judicial. In isolation, personal change will struggle to secure desistance if that change is not also recognized and supported by the community ('social rehabilitation'), by the law and by the state ('judicial rehabilitation'). Without these forms of informal and formal social recognition, we argue, legitimate opportunities (for example, for participation in the labour market or in other important areas of social life) will not become available and a return to offending may be made more likely. In some cases, the failure in state punishment to attend directly to the need for moral rehabilitation (the settling of debts between the 'offender', the victim and their community) may undermine social rehabilitation and leave the relational breach unrepaired. More generally, our argument is that these four forms of rehabilitation are very often interdependent, and that if correctional services fail to attend to all four of them, they will reduce the likelihood of supporting desistance. The importance of social relations in desistance processes thus underlines the need to ensure that concepts of reciprocity, subsidiarity, solidarity and integration must inform the means through which these four forms of rehabilitation are operationalized.

Pseudonym	Born / age	Offence Type	No. of self-reported Convictions	Age at onset⁴	Age at desistance⁵	Length of offending career: years
Andy	1961 / 48	Acquisitive	19	13	N/A	35
Seth	1965 / 43	Acquisitive & Violent	50	9	22 (1987)	13
Harry	1961 / 47	Acquisitive & Violent	3 pages	13	33 (1994)	20
Jed	1961 / 48	Acquisitive & Violent	80	14	30 (1991)	16
Jay	1963 / 46	Acquisitive & Violent	20	13	29 (1992)	16
Evan	1965 / 43	Acquisitive	100	14	29 (1994)	15

Table 1: Overview of offending trajectories

⁴Age at onset refers to onset of an established pattern of offending.

⁵Age at desistance refers to the age at which an individual considers they desisted. It is noteworthy that both Seth and Jed offended again at a later date they regard this as conceptually different from their earlier offending.

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