



THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL RELATIONS IN PERSONAL CHANGE

Beth Weaver argues that desistance is a means rather than an end



THIS ARTICLE outlines the findings of a study of the pathways into and out of offending of a naturally forming group (or gang) whose lives had shared beginnings but diverse outcomes. The study showed how relationships within and outwith the group shaped and affected the members' likelihood of offending and desistance, and thus how individual, relational, cultural and social contexts influence onset, persistence of, and desistance from offending.

While there is consensus that various social relations have a key role to play in enabling and/or sustaining desistance, no desistance studies have analysed the dynamics of social relations, or the way they link individuals with their environments. Indeed, most theoretical explanations for desistance focus on the interaction between structure (external social factors) and agency (internal personal factors). Informed by Donati's (2011) relational sociology, this study analysed the individual, relational and structural contributions to persistence in or desistance from offending (Weaver 2012, 2013a). This article presents a brief glimpse into the contributions of social relations to offending and desistance, and concludes by considering the implications of these insights for criminal justice practice.

The character of social relations

A detailed analysis of the properties and characteristics of different social relations and their contributions to processes of change is not possible here, but briefly, the impact of a social relation on individuals is not just about the interpersonal effects of one person on another as some contemporary desistance studies would suggest. Rather, participating in any social relation involves an 'exchange of something'; a reciprocal action which generates a mutual or interdependent connection between individuals-in-relation (Donati: 2011: 73).

It is the practice of reciprocity that generates and regenerates the bond between people and which sustains it. In this way, social relations can influence those participating in them. The relationship between people, their mutual orientation towards maintaining the assets that being in this relationship produces (such as loyalty, trust, care and concern) are powerful motivations for human behaviour. In order to maintain these assets, people will make changes to the way they interact with each other, to their behaviour or to their way of living, in order to maintain the relationship, because the assets that they value the most depend on the relationship surviving.

The reflexive process this entails is concerned with elaborating a new awareness of 'we', a new way of being in relation to one another, in such a way that it benefits each person participating in the relation. Essentially, the impact of a given social relation on behaviour is attributable to the bonds maintained between people that constitute their reciprocal orientations towards each other; the outcome of their interactive dynamics; the interaction with and influence of other social relations within which they participate; and the characteristics that a given type of social relation. For example, father to son or employer to employee relations entail impacts and outcomes 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 on these relations in a manner consistent with their ultimate concerns, goals or aspirations (Donati 2011).

The social relations that this study focused on were friendship groups, employment and faith communities, intimate relationships, and the 'families of formation' that emerge from intimate relationships we develop. What these different social relations have in common is that they all incorporate shared expectations of reciprocity which imply interdependency.

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Those social relations which were most causally influential in the desistance process were characterised by ways in which people related to each other which manifested as solidarity and subsidiarity, or in other words, a sense of 'we-ness'. Put simply, subsidiarity is a way to support and help another person without making him or her passive or dependent. It allows and assists the other to do what they need to do for themselves to realise their ultimate concerns, goals or aspirations. Subsidiarity cannot work without solidarity (which means sharing a responsibility through reciprocity and which implies interdependence). These principles confer mutual responsibilities on each person for supporting change and in taking responsibility for personal change:

"Evan: For the first year ... they were always with me night and day, people like Peter and Jay ... they almost sort of mentored me ... These guys put a lot of time into me, encouraged me and supported me until I almost could stand on my feet myself in a sense."

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 the individuals involved, and the effects of their interactions with each other, that are critical to understanding their contributions to desistance. Social relations do not cause, nor are they conditional on, behavioural change. They can only exert influence where the individual is open to that influence because of their individual and relational concerns or priorities and their desire to maintain the relationship. Moreover, the extent to which the nature of, or experience of participating in, the social relation creates an environment of and resource for social recognition emerged as significant in understanding the role of social relations.

Ultimately, however, desistance emerged, in this study, not as an end in itself, as some studies tend to imply, but as a means to realising and maintaining the men's individual and relational concerns, with which continued offending became (sometimes incrementally) incompatible. Desistance thus occurs primarily within and through social relations and the reciprocal informal exchanges that take place between family and friends and the social relations that manifest through work and (for some) faith.

Developing a sense of we-ness: implications for practice

A person who commits a crime has to be punished because he has violated not only the norms of society but 'the common responsibility (solidarity)' (Donati 2009: 227). If, however, punishment has a merely punitive or vengeful aim, or if it is simply incapacitative, it is likely to have the effect of fracturing relations and severing natural norms of reciprocity. It can be inferred from this that desistance can be supported through means and processes that enable the (re)connection of the individual to social networks that are restorative and allow people to fulfil their reciprocal obligations.

Recognising individuals, families and other informal networks of support as assets that mutually support each other, means creating practices premised on the principles and practices of subsidiarity and solidarity; practices that can generate, support and sustain the kinds of assets and reflexive relational networks that reside at the heart of the desistance process. Indeed, if the process of desistance, and the people who support it, extend beyond the proclivities and practice of the justice sector, this would suggest investing in or supporting peer mentoring, self-help, activism and mutual aid and recognising their role in also collaboratively co-producing desistance-promoting community justice services (see for example Weaver 2011).

Enhancing or building on existing circuits of social reciprocity between individuals, families and communities, and supporting processes of relational reflexivity also requires developing practices that will enable practitioners to connect to and constructively reinforce positive social relationships and to support and enable people to relinquish negative social relationships and access alternative ones. Examples might include offering parenting classes, relationship counselling, and, where appropriate, assistance with family reunification, mediation and rebuilding, as well as problem-solving family work or developing and facilitating mutual aid based support

groups (Weaver 2013b). It is equally true, however, that many people have severed ties to family and friends in which case the development of solidarity and subsidiarity needs to find other relational contexts.

To that end, it might also be worth considering the development of larger, more formalised circuits of social reciprocity based loosely on the circles of support model, to support desistance and aid social participation. Essentially, the implication is that we should develop a sense of 'we-ness', both in terms of how we understand the individual in their emotionally and relationally textured world and in terms of the means and processes through which we endeavour to support individuals to realise their individual and relational concerns, goals or aspirations, and, in that, to change the direction of their lives.

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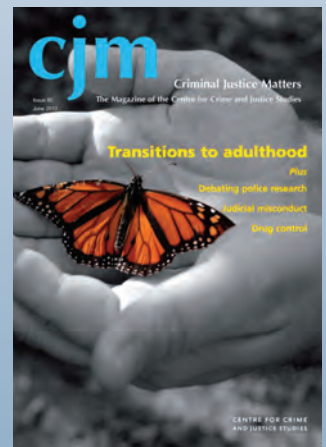
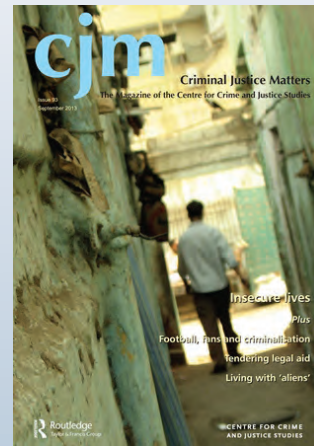
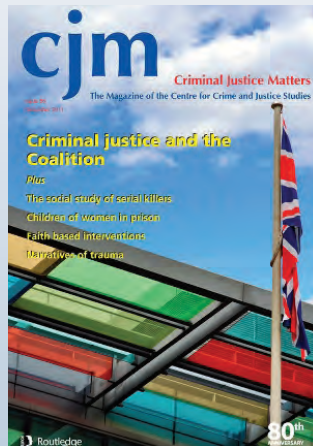
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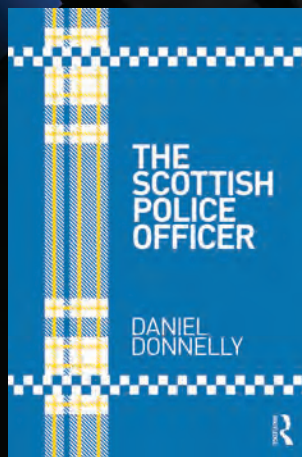
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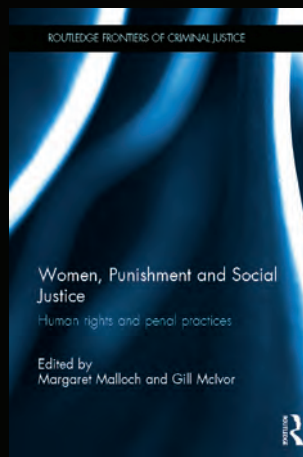
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