

Critical perspectives on desistance

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Writing in the mid-2000s and following from emerging evidence from desistance studies, McNeill (2006: 39) proposed that research on desistance offered a new ‘paradigm for offender management’. Insights from desistance research, he argued, not only provided emergent evidence about the ways in which people cease offending and how they might be supported to do so, but also a solid normative basis for probation practice. For many research on desistance, and its translation into practice offered an antidote to the overarching emphasis on ‘What Works’, public protection, and risk that permeated probation practice, particularly in England and Wales, at the time. This was a period that had seen the reformulation of probation from an ‘alternative to custody’ to ‘punishment in the community’ and where the public were cast as the beneficiaries of probation supervision, and the ‘offender’ the person from whom the public were to be afforded protected from (Burke and Collett, 2015; Worrall and Hoy, 2005).

Research on desistance therefore moved the dial somewhat towards a focus on processes of change, where motivation for change comes from, and in what contexts it occurs. This shift in locus, towards recognizing that ‘desistance belongs to the desister’, i.e. it does not reside with the expert practitioner, had parallels with earlier attempts to recognize and foreground the agency of people subject to probation supervision (e.g., Bottoms and McWilliams, 1979). Insights from research on desistance – which encompasses a wide range of scholarship, including life-course studies, explorations of the psychological dynamics of change and identity, the salience of social bonds and the wider structural and cultural contexts which support or inhibit desistance (Farrall and Calverley, 2006) – have since informed guidance on how desistance can be supported in criminal justice policy and practice (McNeill and Weaver, 2010).

In the intervening years this journal has published numerous articles exploring aspects of desistance, including critical considerations of the dynamics between desistance and public protection (Weaver, 2014); the dynamics of desistance from sexual offending (Farmer et al., 2015) and the relevance of trauma to processes of desistance (Anderson, 2016). And as Maruna and Mann (2019: 4) have recently observed ‘desistance’ has become ‘a near ubiquitous buzzword’ in criminal justice policy and practice. Organizations refer to their work as being ‘desistance-focused’ and policy documents such as the new *Target Operating Model for Probation Services in England and Wales* (HMPPS, 2021) proclaim a desire to promote

desistance in practice. Everyone, it seems supports desistance. After all, who can be against the idea of stopping offending and moving on towards a non-offending life?

But what does 'supporting desistance' mean in practical terms and can the rhetoric serve to responsabilize individuals without providing sufficient supports? Furthermore, given what we know about the often negative impacts of criminal justice system interactions, is the idea of supporting desistance within the frame of the criminal justice system a realistic aspiration? Some of these questions are addressed in the collection of articles in this Special Issue exploring *Critical Perspectives on Desistance*.

The first article by Sam Ainslie is based on exploratory research conducted in the National Probation Service (NPS) following the Transforming Rehabilitation reforms. This article explores practitioners' perspectives on desistance and the extent to which they apply a 'desistance-focused' approach in practice. Ainslie observes that practitioners demonstrated elements of desistance-focused practice, which she identified as being conducive with the eight desistance principles enunciated by McNeill and Weaver (2010). These principles included being realistic, demonstrating hope and motivation, respecting individuality, and recognizing the significance of social contexts. Ainslie concludes that there is evidence of an 'enduring probation habitus' conducive to supporting desistance, even in the context of widespread institutional upheaval. However, she also argues that this is set within wider institutional imperatives which fail to sufficiently recognize the complexity of the desistance process and the need to support the development of *both* human and social capital.

The question of responsabilization and the failure to adequately account for the structural conditions surrounding women's criminalization and victimization is at the core of Rutter and Barr's critique in the next article in the issue: *Being a 'good woman': Stigma, relationships and desistance*. Following a rich vein of feminist criminological scholarship, which has criticized the occlusion of women's perspectives in research and practice, Rutter and Barr note how much of the foundational research on desistance has explored the perspectives of white men, and in some cases has instrumentalized heterosexual women as the bit-players in the desistance process. This sees the familiar trope of the 'good woman' who influences the man to 'go straight'. Drawing on findings from two separate research studies exploring the perspectives of criminalized women, Rutter and Barr observe that the trope of the 'good woman' is also realized in women's own accounts and compounds experiences of stigmatization and shame. They further argue that criminalized women's experiences of victimization direct attention towards the need for more critical considerations of the relational and structural dimensions of women's lives.

The importance of structural contexts in supporting desistance are increasingly recognized (Farrall, 2019). Integrated theories of desistance speak to the necessity to consider the entwined nature of individual and social contexts (LeBel et al., 2008). Meaningful employment offers tangible goods in terms of financial security and the prospect of increased self-confidence and self-efficacy, which are positively associated with desistance from offending (Uggen and Wakefield, 2008).

However, there are well-recognized barriers to people who have criminal convictions accessing employment particularly in the context a criminal record regime which places onerous requirements disclose a history of offending many years after these offences have receded into the past. Atherton and Buck's article in this issue reports on innovative research conducted with employers who recruit criminalized people. As they note, the propensity of research has explored why employers *do not* recruit people with convictions, however, in this article they shift the focus to explore *why some employers do*. Amongst their sample they noted that employers who proactively recruited people with convictions were motivated by personal drivers for social justice, which aligned with the corporate responsibility goals of their organizations. Atherton and Buck also note the potential for probation practitioners as 'brokers' connecting people with convictions with employers locally.

These concepts of brokerage and the intersections between structure and agency in desistance are also explored by Best in colleagues in their article which develops the concept of 'justice capital' as a means to promote desistance. Based on research carried out in Australia and the United Kingdom and building on the concept of 'recovery capital', Best et al. identify that 'justice capital', which includes the resources of institutions available to support effective rehabilitation, reintegration, and desistance, can be a useful way to think about the way in which criminal justice institutions and practices can be oriented towards supporting desistance. Importantly, they also explore how negative forms of capital including the absence of procedural fairness and poor treatment and conditions, can diminish any attempts to support desistance.

The cultural conditions impacting on probation practice and experiences of desistance are explored in Fernando's article reporting on a comparative study of French and English probation supervisees. The potential of probation supervision to assist desistance has been a rich source of research, which has been previously documented in the pages of this journal (e.g., King, 2013; McCulloch, 2005). Fernando's research highlights differences in the subjective experiences of supervision in France and England, which can in part be linked to the purposes of probation and the resources available to practitioners. One of the notable differences for instance, was the sense in which French probationers perceived probation supervision to be a source of practical support, whereas English supervisees in this research reported the experience of probation as being 'a sort of check-up'. Furthermore, the different levels of accountability and oversight in the French system, where the progress of supervisees is regularly reviewed by an implementation court provided for a qualitatively different experience.

Finally, in the last two articles within this special issue desistance is considered in relation to technology from two very different perspectives. Rutter explores the context in which social media has an influential role in identity and relational desistance. Social media can have both negative and positive effects. The former coming from the perpetuation of labelling, and conversely the more positive effects deriving from a sense of community and a means to challenge stigmatization. Rutter argues that more consideration needs to be given to the role of social media in this context. Meanwhile Morris et al.'s article explores the role of digital technology in

supporting desistance. This piece documents the development of a digitally enabled toolkit that has been co-designed with people on probation to address Intimate Partner Violence. Morris et al. conclude that greater attention needs to be given towards the role of technology in supporting desistance.

The wide range of articles included in this issue spanning a range of different countries and perspectives provide evidence of the ongoing critical engagement with concepts of desistance. This journal has provided a platform for these discussions over many years, and we hope to continue these dialogues. As ever we welcome your feedback.

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