DESISTANCE AND DEVELOPMENT: THE PSYCHOSOCIAL PROCESS OF 'GOING STRAIGHT'

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That most young offenders eventually 'mature' out of deviant behaviour is one of the most well-known findings in criminology. What is less well known is what this change process involves. It is argued that this lack of understanding stems from the shortcomings of the traditional criminological framework for examining desistance and other phenomena. Narrative studies is suggested as an alternative framework for investigating the human change process, and an example is provided of a research project in Liverpool that is employing these methods.

The good news is that most juvenile delinquents are leading quite successful lives by the age of 32. (Farrington, 1995).

Few phenomena in criminology are as widely acknowledged and as poorly understood as desistance from crime. For most individuals, participation in 'street crimes' generally begins in the early teenage years, peaks in late adolescence or young adulthood, and ends before the person reaches 30 or 40 years of age. This pattern emerges in studies using diverse methodology (Farrington, 1986; Hindelang, 1981; Rowe and Tittle, 1977; Sullivan, 1989) and some argue that it has remained virtually unchanged for about 150 years (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990). At least as far back as 1915, Goring called this age-crime relationship a 'law of nature'. Criminal behaviour seems to be largely a young person's activity.

At some point in their life course, usually between 18 and 35 years of age, even serious offenders tend to undergo what Wolfgang et al. (1972) describe as 'spontaneous remission', where criminal behaviour seems to cease. Yet, traditional criminological theories have no easy explanation for the process of desistance from crime, and in fact tend to imply that a person's criminal behaviour should increase over time (Gove, 1985; Moffitt, 1993). Hirschi and Gottfredson (1983) argue that the relationship between age and crime 'easily qualifies as the most difficult fact in the field.' Moffitt (1993) concurs, calling the 'mysterious' age-crime relationship "at once the most robust and least understood empirical observation in the field of criminology" (p. 675).

This paper is intended to address the 'social and cognitive processes' (Graham and Bowling, 1995) and the 'complex interplay between objective and subjective contingencies' (Gartner and Piliavin, 1988) involved in 'going straight' or desistance from crime. Previous research (e.g. Graham and Bowling, 1995) has addressed the question of who is most likely to desist (whites/non-whites; males/females) and when this change is likely to occur in the life course. Much less is known about how and why desistance is possible for those individuals who do eventually desist, and how social scientists can conceptualise this process.

The Desistance Literature: Theory and Research

In one of the most thorough analyses of the topic, Rand (1987) suggests, '(T)he phenomenon of desistance has received no specific theoretical or empirical attention' (p. 134). Though this is overstated (see Shover, 1985, for instance), studies of desistance tend to exist in relative isolation from one another and most are not theoretically informed. Certainly, nothing like a

consensus exists for understanding why young offenders desist from crime. Shover (1985) writes, 'Although it is conventional wisdom that most offenders eventually desist from criminal behaviour, criminology textbooks have little or nothing to say about this process' (p. 15). Mulvey and LaRosa (1986) conclude, 'In short, we know that many youth "grow out" of delinquent activity, but we know very little about why' (213).

This gap in the literature is a result of both methodological and theoretical weaknesses in existing research. Critically, most of the leading desistance explanations continue to fall into the dichotomy of *ontogenetic* and *sociogenic* paradigms (Sullivan, 1996). While Lewin's (1935) assertion that behaviour is a product of an interaction between persons and environments has virtually been accepted as a truism in criminology, this acceptance has not led to a wealth of interactionist theories and research on the topic of desistance. As a result, a polarised debate has emerged regarding whether or not the phenomenon of desistance can even be explained at all (e.g. Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990).

The Ontogenetic Paradigm ('They will grow out of it')

One of the first social scientists to address the question of personal reform was Adolphe Quetelet. Quetelet (1833) argues that the penchant for crime diminishes with age 'due to the enfeeblement of physical vitality and the passions' (cited in Brown and Miller, 1988, p. 13). Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck (1940) develop this into their theory of 'maturational reform', in which they argue that intrinsic criminality naturally declines after the age of 25. The Gluecks (1940) suggest that with the 'sheer passage of time' juvenile delinquents 'grow out' of this transitory phase and 'burn out' physiologically. Significantly, they conclude, 'Ageing is the only factor which emerges as significant in the reformative process' (p. 105).

Although the Gluecks (1940, p. 270) explicitly urge future researchers to 'dissect maturation into its components', Shover (1985) points out that criminology's 'explanatory efforts have not progressed appreciably beyond (the Gluecks') work' (p. 77). *Maturational reform continues to be the most influential theory of desistance in criminology.* Wilson and Herrnstein (1985, p. 145), for instance, argue that none of the possible correlates of age, such as employment, peers or family circumstances, explain crime as well as the variable of age itself. 'That is to say, an older person is likely to have a lower propensity for crime than a younger person, even after they have been matched in demographic variables.' Similarly, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) suggest, 'Spontaneous desistance is just that, change in behaviour that cannot be explained and change that occurs regardless of what else happens' (p. 136). According to this view, the effect of age on crime is 'natural', direct and invariant across social, temporal and economic conditions.

Similarly, efforts have been made to use normative patterns of human development to explain desistance as a natural or normal process of ageing (Gove, 1985; Jolin, 1985). In his biopsychosocial theory of desistance, Gove (1985) writes:

As persons ... move through the life cycle, (1) they will shift from self-absorption to concern for others; (2) they will increasingly accept societal values and behave in socially appropriate ways; (3) they will become more comfortable with social relations; (4) their activities will increasingly reflect a concern for others in their community; and (5) they will become increasingly concerned with the issue of the meaning of life (p. 128).

Borrowing largely from Levinson's linear model of normative adult development, such theories generally suggest that desistance from criminal behaviour is a natural 'stage' in personality development, parallel to the questioning of roles and identity that supposedly takes place for all adults at mid-life (Jolin, 1985).

According to all these maturational theories, ageing 'causes' desistance. Yet, as Sutton (1994) suggests, 'To say that age influences everything is to say nothing' (228). Developmentalists are increasingly beginning to view biological age as an "ambiguous" and "irrelevant" variable, with little meaning except that which is socially attached to it (Dannefer, 1984; Havighurst, 1973; Neugarten and Neugarten, 1986; Rutter, 1989). Few criminologists would be satisfied with the assessment: 'Criminal behaviour peaks at age seventeen, therefore crime is *caused* by turning seventeen'. Yet, ageing continues to be seen as an adequate explanation for desistance.

Though age is certainly a very strong correlate of desistance, criminologists have generally failed to 'unpack' the 'meaning' of age, according to Sampson and Laub (1992). Age indexes a range of different variables, including biological changes, social and normative transitions,

and life experiences, and in itself is not an explanation for change. Rutter (1996) writes, 'It is necessary to go on to ask which features indexed by age constitute the mediating mechanisms' (608). Rutter cites research which indicates that the effect of years of schooling outweigh the effect of chronological age on student performance on various cognitive tests, for instance.

While Gove (1985) and others have appealed to the *physiological* changes that typically accompany ageing to explain desistance, these theories generally fall short as explanations as well. For instance, though testosterone levels decrease with age, the age-testosterone curve is far from parallel to the sharply peaking age-crime curve (Farrington, 1986). Similarly, while physical strength tends to peak at age 30 (Adams, 1997), the decline in physical abilities in adulthood is (thankfully) nowhere near as steep as the decline in criminal behaviour.

Much of the developmental research on the age-crime relationship commits what Dannefer (1984, p. 101) refers to as the 'ontogenetic fallacy', by accepting that changes in behaviour reflect the natural and universal 'properties of the ageing organism' rather than social or institutional processes or the age-graded structure of social roles and social controls. As with differences in gender or race, some differences in behaviour between persons of different ages might be intrinsic to ageing itself, but it would be absurd to ignore the fact that 40 year-olds are systematically treated differently than 20 year-olds, in Western society, just as men are treated differently than women (Greenberg, 1981). In fact, portraying desistance as 'natural' might actually decrease public support for the social mechanisms (such as rehabilitation and reintegration services for ex-offenders) that may be instrumental in existing patterns.

Most importantly, longitudinal studies of crime in the life course (e.g. Farrington and West, 1993) show a great variety of adult outcomes for young offenders, with far greater diversity in the ages of desistance than in the ages of onset of criminal behaviour. Therefore, any theory that uses age alone or a single, normative pattern of development to explain desistance *fails to account for the considerable heterogeneity of developmental pathways*.

In summary, most ontogenetic theories of desistance generally only restate the facts of the age-crime relationship, while doing little to increase our understanding of *how* this change takes place (Wootton, 1959). As Matza (1964) argues, a simple notion like 'burning out,' also 'merely reiterates the occurrence of maturational reform - It hardly explains it' (p. 24). We need to go beyond restating the correlates of age and begin investigating the dimensions, ingredients or facets of desistance.

The Sociogenic Paradigm ('A steady job and the love of a good woman')

Beyond 'maturational reform', the next most influential explanation of desistance is the theory of social bonds or 'informal social control' (Farrington, 1992). Social bond theory suggests that varying informal ties to family, employment or educational programs in early adulthood explain changes in criminality during the life course. Therefore, unlike maturational or developmental theories, social theories posit that the experiences that lead to desistance from crime are not necessarily universal, and can often be partially under the control of the individual (as in the case of entering employment or finding a partner).

Matza (1964) was among the first to address this issue with his notion of a 'drift'. To Matza, most delinquents are caught somewhere in between the social bonds of adulthood and deviant peer subcultures without a deep attachment to either. Once adolescence has ended, and adult roles become available, therefore, the majority of young people easily move away from their weak affiliation with crime.

Trasler (1979, 1980) and Sampson and Laub (1993) also describe turning points that can redirect a person's life path away from delinquency. Trasler (1980, p. 10) writes, '(A)s they grow older, most young men gain access to other sources of achievement and social satisfaction - a job, a girlfriend, a wife, a home and eventually children - and in doing so become gradually less dependent upon peer-group support' (cited in Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990, p. 135). Those who lack these bonds are the most likely to stay involved in criminal and delinquent behaviour because they have the least to lose from social sanctions and ostracism. Moreover, the stronger the ties to society (i.e. the higher one's legal income), the more likely a person is to desist from criminal behaviour (e.g. Pezzin, 1995).

Substantial research confirms that desistance from crime is correlated with *finding employment* (Glaser, 1964; Mischkowitz, 1994; Sampson and Laub, 1993; Shover, 1985); *completing schooling* (Farrington, et al. 1986; Rand, 1987); *getting married* (Farrington and West, 1995; Gibbens, 1984; Irwin, 1970; Meisenhelder, 1977; Mischkowitz, 1994; Rand, 1987; Rutherford, 1992; Rutter et al, 1990; Sampson and Laub, 1993; West, 1982; Zoccolillo et al., 1992); and *becoming a parent* (Leibrich, 1993).

Still, these correlations are by no means apparent in all of the research on desistance, and treatment programs designed to test social bonding theory experimentally have generally been viewed as failures (Uggen, 1996). Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) conclude that differences in the rates of criminality among employed and unemployed, other factors being equal, are 'small, non-existent, or even in the wrong direction' (pp. 138-139). McCord (1990) also argues that providing work and educational opportunities for ex-offenders may not be a panacea for reform. First, improved opportunities for legitimate success have not consistently reduced criminal behaviour (see also Soothill, 1974; Haines, 1990). Secondly, the connection between low job attachment and crime does not seem to hold up for a substantial proportion of the population - namely women - who have been historically detached from employment opportunities, but remain highly underrepresented in crime statistics (see also Naffine and Gale, 1989).

Similarly, according to Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990, p. 140), wives, homes and children 'sound nice' as explanations for desistance, but 'they do not seem to have an impact on the likelihood of crime' (see also Wright and Wright, 1992). In fact, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) argue that young men in relationships with females are actually more likely to commit delinquent acts than unattached youth. Reviewing research on 'assortative mating', they conclude, 'The offender tends to convert these institutions (of marriage or jobs) into sources of satisfaction consistent with his previous criminal behaviour' (1990: 141, see Caspi and Moffitt, 1993).

Individuals differ enormously in their response to social stimuli, and the same social event can affect individuals in different ways based on differences in gender, age, race, prior experiences and personality (Cowan, 1991; Rutter, 1996). For instance, Graham and Bowling (1995) found that, for females, social transitions like leaving home and forming a new family unit were highly correlated with desistance from crime. Yet, for young males, these social transitions seemed to have little effect on patterns of offending.

Similarly, in a reanalysis of the National Supported Work Demonstration Project data, Uggen (1996) found that the effect of providing marginal employment opportunities for ex-offenders was age-dependent. While persons aged 27 or older in the supported work project were more likely to desist from crime, the employment scheme seemed to have little effect for persons under 27. Uggen concluded that the meaning of work and crime may change as individuals move from adolescence into adulthood, indicating that desistance also has a subjective component that needs to be understood.

Uggen (1996) points out that even proponents of social bonding theory admit that the relationship between social ties and desistance has 'strings attached'. Sampson and Laub (1993, p. 304), for instance, argue that employment 'by itself' does not cause desistance; the relationship is conditional upon a person's 'commitment' to a particular job. Similarly, Rutter (1996) writes, 'Marriage *as such* has no very predictable effect. It all depends on the sort of person whom you marry, when you marry, and the sort of relationship that is achieved' (610, italics mine). Loeber, et al. (1991) argue that educational opportunities do not correlate with desistance, but 'attitudes towards education' do (71-73). Hence, desistance depends on not just the *existence* of social attachments, but on the perceived strength, quality and interdependence of these ties (West, 1982). Such qualifications to social bond theory only serve to reinforce the view of social bonding as an incomplete understanding of desistance.

Most importantly, the relationship between finding work (or getting married) and giving up crime, rather than being causally related, might be a spurious association, based on some common, *internal* factor, such as an underlying strength of personality (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990) or else a conscious *choice* on the part of individuals to change (Cusson and Pinsonneault, 1986). Individuals predisposed to committing crime for whatever reason may be unlikely to want to pursue jobs or relationships (c.f. Akerstrom, 1985). Clarke and Cornish (1985) have refocused the attention of criminologists on the very old notions of choice and human agency in the determination of criminal behaviour. Certainly, rational calculations, emotions, impulses, and intentional decisions play a major role in the process of 'going straight' (Cusson and Pinsonneault, 1986; Farrall and Bowling, 1997). Yet, social bonding

theories of desistance portray human behaviour as largely determined by external forces. Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990, p. 188), for instance, scoff at the notion that 'jobs somehow attach themselves' to individuals, and they emphasise that 'subjects are not randomly assigned to marital statuses.'

To this criticism, Farrington and West (1995) correctly reply, 'If we accepted this argument it would follow that most causal hypotheses in criminology could not be tested' (p. 252). Yet, like biological age, employment and marriage interact with psychosocial variables in a complex fashion. Researchers should make every effort to understand cognitive and subjective correlates as well as the more easily measured (and quantified) social correlates of desistance if we are going to achieve a complete understanding of the process. As is reflected in the well-known aphorism among offenders that 'You rehabilitate yourself' (Meisenhelder, 1977), families, jobs, age, or time cannot change a person who does not want to or make an effort to change. Presumably, individuals make a purposeful decision to marry or find work, and if these bonds sustain desistance, *the internal process involved in staying married or continuing to work needs to be understood if we want to understand how individuals can give up crime.*

Understanding Change in Adulthood

Essentially, what seems to be missing from both ontogenetic and sociogenic approaches is 'the person' - the wholeness and agentic subjectivity of the individual. Sartre (1963, p. 24) argues that trying to explain behaviour (and individual change in particular) by relying on 'the great idols of our epoch - heredity, education, environment, physiological constitution' allows us to 'understand nothing'. He writes:

The transitions, the becomings, the transformations, have been carefully veiled from us, and we have been limited to putting order into the succession by invoking empirically established but literally unintelligible sequences.

Sartre makes the same point as an expanding group of researchers in cognitive and personality psychology: we need a literally *intelligible* sequence, or a coherent 'story' of the individual if we want to understand changes in behaviour such as desistance.

This argument has considerable support from critiques of traditional criminology. Toch (1987) argues:

Positivist approaches ... help us to 'understand crime.' These theories, however, do not permit us to 'understand criminals,' because they are segmental views rather than full-blooded portraits. ... (T)hese must be supplemented with portraits of offender perspectives, and with a review of unique *personal histories* (162, italics mine).

The use of such personal autobiographies in social enquiry, occasionally referred to as 'narrative studies', has been called 'a viable alternative to the positivist paradigm' in social science (Sarbin, 1986, p. vii). According to narrative theory, in order to achieve a contingent, temporally structured and contextualised understanding of human behaviour (Toch's 'full-blooded portraits'), one needs to look at the self-narratives or storied self-concepts of individuals (Bruner, 1987; Giddens, 1991; McAdams, 1985). Essentially, understanding the person means understanding the person's 'story'.

Narrative theories take many shapes (e.g. Gergen, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Ricoeur, 1984), but almost all of them take seriously Murray's (1938, p. 49) aphorism, 'The history of the organism is the organism,' by arguing that the 'self' is essentially a *storied construct*. In a seminal statement of the importance of narrative identity to understanding behaviour, Bruner (1987) writes:

The heart of my argument is this: eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organise memory, to segment and purpose-build the very 'events' of a life. In the end, we become (emphasis added) the autobiographical narratives by which we 'tell about' our lives (p. 15).

The way each of us views our own history is interesting not only because of what it reveals about our personality and our background; *this subjective autobiography actually shapes our future choices and behaviour.* In this framework, life narratives reflect both aspects of Lewin's (1935) equation, providing useful information about the person *and* his or her environment, and also show how the two interact to form a person's personality.

In one influential narrative theory, McAdams (1994) argues that human behaviour is guided by three internalised domains (often called personality): psychological traits, personal strategies, and identity narratives or self stories (see also Conley, 1985). Though traits are relatively stable over the life course, the second two, more contextualised domains of personality leave open the possibility of substantial change in adulthood. To understand the desistance process from this narrative framework, therefore, one needs to analyse each of these domains of the 'whole person'.

Personality Traits

Criminology has seen a revival of the study of the psychological traits of offenders over the last 30 years (Blackburn, 1992; Caspi, et al., 1994; Farrington, 1994). Wilson and Hernnstein (1985), for instance, argue that the primary cause of criminal behaviour is offenders' weak impulse control and lack of empathy for others. Eysenck (1977, 1989), on the other hand, points to a correlation between crime and high levels of extroversion, neurosis, and psychosis.[[[]]]

The consensus reached in this psychometric research is that 'criminality' (or a 'criminal personality') is generally constant over the life course - even when ex-offenders desist from criminal behaviour (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1995; Huesmann, et al., 1984; Loeber, 1982). Osborn and West (1980) found that recidivist offenders who desist from crime 'retained some traits typical of delinquents, most notably their relative high scores on the scale of "antisociality"' (447). Similarly, Charland (1985) found that desisters who had previously committed serious crimes continued to display 'profound personality deficits' (based on numerous trait measures) long after offending had ceased (cited in Loeber and LeBlanc, 1990).

In the trait framework, offenders are seen as 'types' of people suffering from an underlying antisocial personality disorder, with little chance of a 'cure'. Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), for instance, argue that the trait of low self-control is at the root of criminal behaviour, yet they insist that differences between individuals in this trait remain constant over the life course. 'Enhancing the level of self-control appears possible in early childhood, but the record suggests that successful efforts to change the level later in life are exceedingly rare, if not nonexistent' (p. 33).

Maruna (in press) has argued that this finding of continuity in the 'criminal personality' may be a methodological artefact stemming from the concentration on dispositional traits to the exclusion of other aspects of personality. The stability of basic personality traits like extroversion or aggressiveness over time and across contexts is one of the most robust findings in personality psychology (Costa, et al., 1983). Still, people can and do 'change' even if their basic personality traits do not change radically over time (Helson and Stewart, 1994).

By definition, if personality traits changed radically over time, they would not be traits, but rather temporary states or phases, and would lose their theoretical value. The study of traits provide valuable information about individual differences in disposition and personal styles, but the fact that traits are largely stable over time means they can probably tell us very little about how and why people change their behaviour. As Moffitt (1993) writes:

(Psychological) theories typically rely on the stability of individual differences in traits such as impulsivity, neuroticism, autonomic nervous system reactivity, or low intelligence. Psychological theories cannot explain the onset and desistance of adolescent delinquency without positing compelling reasons for a sudden and dramatic population shift in criminogenic traits followed by return to baseline a few years later (1993: 694).

In order to understand desistance (or any significant behavioural change), researchers need to explore *other* aspects of personality, such as offender self-concepts or personal strategies (Maruna, in press; McAdams, 1994).

Strategies and Goals

McAdams' (1994) second level of personality involves the plans or goals the person is trying to accomplish. Linked to attitudes and group norms, these goal articulations are explicitly contextualised and change with situational and developmental demands. Criminal desisters are likely to have more spiritual and generative goals and strivings than persistent offenders. In an exploratory study, reformed ex-offenders frequently reported turning to a 'higher power' and making an effort to 'give something back' to their communities (Maruna, 1997). This seems to be a strategy both for 'atoning' for past wrongs, as well as for advertising a new identity in an effort to alleviate the stigma faced by ex-convicts (see Meisenhelder, 1982).

The Narrative Identity

McAdams' (1994) third level of personality is the internalised and evolving narrative individuals construct to integrate their pasts, presents and perceived futures into a personal identity that sustains and guides behaviour. Overwhelmed with the choices and possibilities of modern society (Fromm, 1941; Manning, 1991), modern individuals internalise this autobiographical narrative in order to provide a sense of coherence and predictability to the chaos of their lives (Giddens, 1991; Sartre, 1964). According to Giddens (1991), in modern society, 'a person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor - important though this is - in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going' (54).

The storied identity can be seen as an active 'information-processing structure', a 'cognitive schema' or a construct system that is both shaped by and later mediates social interaction. Giddens (1991) writes, 'Each of us not only 'has,' but lives a biography' (1991: 14). People tell stories about what they do and why they did it. These narratives explain their actions in a sequence of events that connect up to explanatory goals, motivations, and feelings. Moreover, these self-narratives then act to shape and guide future behaviour, as persons act in ways that accord to the stories we have created about ourselves. Therefore, while our life goals give us a direction in which to act, our self-narratives provide the shape and coherence to our lives (Giddens, 1991).

While a variety of methods have been proposed for accessing life narratives (see Singer and Salovey, 1993), most involve intensive, non-clinical, semi-structured interviewing in field settings. Importantly, the tape-recorded and transcribed life story documents produced in such research *themselves* do not represent the self-narratives that guide an individual's behaviour. However, the stories people tell about themselves are assumed to 'hold the outlines' of the *internalised*, on-going self-narrative, in the same way that answers to a psychological trait questionnaire are supposed to represent a person's personality traits.

Samplings of life narratives can be collected for any population of interest (e.g. Parisian bakers, drug users, or persons who have desisted from crime), content-coded, and analysed for patterns in tone, theme, plot, roles, value-structure, coherence and complexity. The precise methodology of this themal analysis varies (see Denzin, 1989), yet some of the most innovative studies have borrowed constructs from the work of semiotics, linguistics, hermeneutics and psychobiography (e.g. Manning, 1991). The accounts and explanations themselves (as well as the 'facts' or biographical events they describe) are the primary 'data' of these studies (McAdams, 1993).

NARRATIVES OF DESISTANCE AND CHANGE

Whereas personality traits are supposed to be both stable and 'transcontextual', the narrative identity 'has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual' (Giddens, 1991: 52). Unlike developmental stage theorists, narrative theorists generally argue that identity is a life-long project that individuals continuously restructure in light of new experiences and information (McAdams, 1993). Epstein and Erskine (1983) compare narrative identity change to paradigm shifts in the sciences, where past information is reorganised and understood in a new light. Individuals interpret and assimilate every emotionally salient experience into this evolving and cohesive narrative. When information is processed that does not fit into one's story, the person can either change his or her story to accommodate the new facts or distort the information to fit his or her story.

The internal changes involved in desistance from crime are likely to be charted and understood on this narrative level of personality. Erikson (1959) and Elkind (1968) argue that people first begin to shape individual identities during adolescence. Consequently, teenagers go through a 'psychosocial moratorium' where they 'try on' various possible selves 'for size'. Identity theorists would argue, therefore, that it is no coincidence that these 'disorganised' early narratives correspond with high rates of criminal behaviour. Canter (1994) writes, 'Many acts of violence seem to erupt at a time when the perpetrator is searching for identity and personal meaning' (p. 326). Understanding how individuals who internalise a criminal or deviant label are able to create a new self-understanding for themselves should be a priority in identity research (e.g. Lofland, 1969).

Biography and Society

Importantly, these 'structured self-images' are not created in a vacuum. Identity theorists like Erikson (1959) and Giddens (1991) argue that identity is very much shaped within the constraints and opportunity structure of the social world in which people live. The self is both socially shaped and individually constructed (Meisenhelder, 1982). Rather than stripping individuals of community and macro-historical context, therefore, narrative analysis can inform our understandings by illustrating how the person sees and experiences the world around her. Katz (1988) calls this the merging of 'phenomenal foreground' with 'social background', and most narrative theorists would argue that the two are generally inseparable. Personal autobiographies are also excellent data for the analysis of the underlying economic and sociostructural relations of a population (Bertaux, 1981).

Agency and Choice

Like the 'rational choice' models of criminal decision-making (Clarke and Cornish, 1985; Cusson and Pinsonneault, 1986), narrative theory provides a model of intentional and purposeful human behaviour. From the narrative perspective, when an individual desists from crime, s/he 'acts as his or her own change agent' (Adams, 1997) and is not merely the product of outside forces of social control or personality traits. This alone represents an important and radical departure from traditional, positivist criminology which sees individual behaviour as largely determined by uncontrollable outer or inner forces (Matza, 1964). Brim (1973) writes:

No major investigation has ever been made of the kinds of changes adults may be seeking to make in their personalities; that is, evidently no one has systematically asked adults about this, even though adults, clearly more than children, are able to, and surely do, initiate their own socialisation (1973: 189, cited in Adams, 1997: 334).

The comparison between narrative theory and 'choice' theories of desistance, however, probably ends there. The theory of 'crime as choice' posits that offenders weigh the risks and rewards of crime in much the same way that other economic actors decide to purchase a house or invest in a company. While most self-narratives certainly have an 'internal logic' (Canter, 1994), narrative theory hardly sees individuals in the frame of the 'rational actor model' of economics. For instance, beyond the economists' fuzzy notions of preferences and

constraints, narrative theory incorporates the attitudes, emotions, and self-concepts of social psychology into its notion of choice.

As such, narrative theory explicitly tries to account for individual choices that appear to be far from 'rational'. Narrative theory emphasises that human subjects, unlike their counterparts in the hard sciences, react differently to stimuli based on how events and constructs are 'perceived and interpreted ... in line with pre-existing and emerging goals' (Toch, 1987). Epstein and Erskine (1983, p. 135), for instance, argue that 'behaviour that either is manifestly self-destructive or is maintained in the absence of reinforcement' can be explained and understood by first understanding the actor's 'theory of reality' or guiding 'construct system' (see also Rotenberg's, 1978, discussion of self-defeating behaviour).

Self-stories represent personal outlooks and *theories* of reality, not necessarily an objective reality. For instance, if a person sees himself as 'backed against the wall' or feels that his dignity has been challenged by some insult, he may commit certain acts of violence that would be deemed 'senseless' by the public. Yet, these acts might be perfectly 'rational' in terms of that person's self-understanding. After all, according to narrative theory, like symbolic interactionism, 'If (persons) define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (Thomas and Thomas, 1928: 572).

An inmate in HM Whitemoor Prison provided the following illustration of the power of such situational definitions in his account of the theft of his gold chain:

I said, 'Give me the fucking chain back,' and he pulled a knife out at me and his friend had got this baseball bat. ... I went home, and I couldn't sleep. I kept waking up at 2 a.m. saying, 'I can't deal with this.' My girl was telling me to calm down, let it go. But I kept thinking to myself, 'This is going to have to be something big.' This isn't going to be just a fist fight. This is going to be big. ...Everybody in the scene knew I was looking for him. ...Then eventually I met him at the pub. I brought this knife and I stabbed him. ...Unless you actually grew up in that situation, you wouldn't understand what I was going through. Common sense is just different in that situation. You just don't have the same common sense. Lying in bed, really, I think about it a lot. 'If this...' 'If that...', but then the 'ifs' go away and you just have to say, 'This is the real you.' I had little choice really. Either you do it, or you do nothing and you get written off the scene altogether. Street-wise, that's suicide - you're back to the bottom of the ladder, you're nobody. Sensible-wise, of course, that's the best thing that could happen to you. That means taking the alternative route with the suit and job and all. But I've got a rough streak in me somewhere. ... I had to do it (personal interview, 27.2.97).

Only by understanding the way this man understood himself, his actions, and the 'common sense' of the streets, can one begin to understand why he attempted murder.

To truly desist from crime, according to the narrative perspective, a person needs to restructure his or her understanding of self. If individuals chose to desist from crime as soon as they rationally decide that 'crime doesn't pay', as traditional deterrence and rational choice theories suggest, the recidivism rate of ex-convicts returning to prisons would not be nearly as high as it is (Shover, 1996). Deciding or 'choosing' to give up crime, after all, is vastly different than actual desistance from crime. Individuals can *choose* to stop getting into fights - just like smokers *choose* to quit smoking - seven times a week in some cases. Yet maintaining abstinence from crime involves more than choice. Offenders typically *decide* to 'go straight' (for quite rational reasons) many times over the course of a criminal career, but *continue* to offend - for reasons that are more to do with their perceptions of their situation (Shover, 1996; Maruna, 1997). Understanding the person's narrative can help observers understand these less than rational decisions.

Narrating Desistance

Following criminology's long tradition of autobiographical research (Becker, 1966; Bennett, 1981), several studies of ex-offenders have found indications that a systematic change in identity and self-concept may be critical to the process of reform (Burnett, 1992; Graham and Bowling, 1995; Irwin, 1970; Leibrich, 1993; Maruna, 1997; Meisenhelder, 1982; and Shover, 1985, 1996). Similar indications have been found in research on the cessation of addictive behaviours such as drug use (Biernacki, 1986; Denzin, 1987; DiClemente, 1994; Kellogg, 1993; Waldorf, 1983). These important qualitative studies have generated consistent and empirically testable hypotheses regarding the subjective experience of the conversion experience. Still, this research remains highly disconnected and somewhat outside of mainstream criminological debates.

In one such study, Maruna (1997) analysed the autobiographical narratives of 20 ex-offenders and found substantial evidence for a 'prototypical reform story' that integrates a person's past mistakes into a generative script for the future. Ex-offenders who desisted from crime overwhelmingly attributed their delinquent pasts to environmental factors outside of their control. They attributed their radical lifestyle change to outside forces as well - usually to the generosity of some forgiving person or persons who could see past the ex-offender's mistakes. This opportunity allowed the ex-offender to finally become his or her 'true self' (a good or non-criminal person). As a way of showing appreciation for this second chance, many ex-offenders explained, they are trying to 'give something back' to the society from which they have taken so much. The development of some variation on this coherent self-story may contribute to the process of desistance from crime and support individual efforts to go straight. Unfortunately, like most of the other research on ex-offenders who go straight, Maruna's (1997) study did not include a comparison sample, and so may be seen as largely exploratory. Instead of asking why some individuals desist from crime while others do not, these biographical studies tend to concentrate on the experiences of *all* ex-convicts or the similarities between middle aged offenders and middle aged men in general (e.g. Shover, 1985). In order to isolate what aspects of self-concept are *directly* related to desistance, research needs to compare desisters with a matched sample of offenders who do not desist from crime (see Burnett, 1992, 1994; Glaser, 1964).

The LDS Experience

One on-going, UK-based research project that aims to fill this gap in desistance research is the Liverpool Desistance Study (LDS). The LDS is a four-year narrative study of lives that involves a systematic comparison of the biographies, traits, and social outlooks of a group of desisting former offenders to those of a matched group of active or persisting offenders, over time and across rehabilitative circumstances. In total, 55 men and 10 women have been non-randomly selected to contribute to this small-scale study on the basis of having been identified through ethnographic field work (approx. 1/4); having been recommended by probation officers, social workers or police officers (approx. 1/2); or having been suggested by other ex-offenders through a 'snowball sampling' technique (approx. 1/4). All 65 participants have extensive criminal records and/or reported a variety of criminal activities primarily including armed robbery, burglary, drug sales and shop-lifting.

Although this is not a random sample, it has the advantage of including those offenders and ex-offenders who currently have limited contact with the criminal justice system and social agencies, and therefore, are highly underrepresented in traditional criminological research. Randomised studies of 'successful parolees/probationers' (e.g. Leibrich, 1993) will almost always over-sample either older ex-offenders (released in their 40s or 50s) and/or young people who have very limited offending histories, as these are the most common 'desisters'. The LDS targetted younger ex-offenders (the mean age at the time of the interview was 30) with very extensive offending backgrounds (the mean time spent in prison was 4 years for the sample), as these so-called 'career criminals' are the focus of considerable concern and controversy in criminology.

Participants in the LDS were categorised as 'desisting' (n=30) if they reported no criminal or violent behaviour, arrests or incarcerations over the last year. Farrington (1986) warns that 'even a five-year or ten-year crime-free period is no guarantee that offending has terminated,'

so twelve months may be an inadequate measure of desistance. Nonetheless, from a series of pilot interviews, it became clear that if a serious, habitual offender, like the persons in this sample, managed to remain crime-free for a period of over one month while in the community, this represented a significant and important change in behaviour.

An additional 20 participants, who had all reported committing criminal offences in the last three weeks (or else explicitly stated that they would continue to be involved in criminal behaviour in the future), were labelled 'active' or 'persisting' offenders.[[[]]] This 'active' group is not intended to represent a strict 'control' group, nor is there any assumption that the active sample is in any fundamental way 'different' than the desisting group (i.e. they will likely desist themselves in the near future). The active sample is included to serve as a reference point or a contrasting sample to the 'desisting' group. To the greatest degree possible, the two groups have been matched on a case-by-case basis on variables such as gender, age, number and types of crimes committed, neighbourhood socio-economic status, parents' occupation, race, age of criminal onset, national origins, and high school completion in roughly that order of priority (see below)

Some Sample Characteristics

	Active Group N = 20 Mean (SD)	Desisting Group N = 30 Mean (SD)
Age at time of interview	30 (4.8)	31 (6.9)
Age at first arrest	14 (2.8)	15 (4.4)
Age at first jail term	20 (6.0)	20 (4.7)
Years spent in prison	4.0 (4.3)	3.8 (3.6)
Left school at 16 (per cent)	70%	63%
Raised in 'bad' neighborhood (per cent)	75%	80%
Raised in single parent household (per cent)	55%	63%
Abused or neglected as a child (per cent)	45%	37%

These numbers are as of 2.2.98 and are subject to change as new subjects are added

Importantly, the samples have been purposely matched on several variables thought to be strongly related to desistance from crime (see also Glaser, 1964; Glueck and Glueck, 1940). For instance, research consistently shows that age is the strongest correlate to desistance (Cline, 1980; Wilson and Herrnstein, 1985). Female offenders seem to desist more quickly than male offenders (Graham and Bowling, 1995). Middle class, Caucasians may desist more rapidly than low-income minorities (Greenberg, 1983), and the earlier offending the begins, the longer criminality typically lasts over the life course (Moffitt, 1993).

Nonetheless, these variables provide little understanding about *how* and why desistance occurs, and tell us even less about how policy can encourage desistance from crime, since gender, race and social background are not easily manipulated through intervention. Trying to explore these independent variables in a small study like this would only confuse the effort to understand desistance as a developmental *process*. Without a random sampling, this study cannot answer the questions of "who" desists and 'when'. Instead, the purpose of the project is to explore the question of 'how' desistance works for those who do desist. By matching the two samples on the key non-process, unchanging variables (like race and gender), the developmental and varying components of this process - *beyond biological age* - will hopefully emerge.

Levels of Assessment

The first, multi-phase interview protocol usually lasted two to three hours, and was designed to provide extensive qualitative and quantitative information by employing a variety of cognitive, personality, attitudinal and biographical instruments. The aim of the LDS is to provide extensive 'personological profiles' of the interview participants, including information regarding all three of McAdams' (1994) levels of personality (traits, strivings and narratives). Patterns across both groups will be analysed in an effort to understand the narrative strategies that best support 'going straight' or persisting with offending.

- **Trait Scores.** As part of the initial assessment, two standardised, psychological inventories were administered to allow rough comparisons between the two and to determine how representative these samples are by comparing them to larger studies of ex-offenders (e.g. Gough, 1965). The first is a measure of self-control, while the second is designed to measure a person's 'big five' personality traits (conscientiousness, agreeableness, extroversion, neuroticism, and openness to experience). These trait scales provide validated methods for assessing the basic, dispositional traits most highly associated with criminal behaviour.
- **Goals and Strivings**. Respondents were also given a modified version of Emmons' Personal Strivings Questionnaire designed to measure personal goals, concerns and projects. Responses will be coded and compared across samples based on measured levels of spiritual and generative goals, using Emmons' coding manual. Strivings will also be coded on levels of achievement, affiliation, intimacy, power, personal growth, self-presentation, self sufficiency, maladaptations, and self-transcendence.
- **Narrative Identity** Finally, all participants were administered a modified version of McAdams' Life Story Interview protocol, supplemented by open-ended questions regarding crime and corrections-related experiences inside and outside of the prison system. These interviews are structured so as to be comparable across the samples, yet participants were allowed to follow whatever tangent they felt appropriate.

Following Sampson and Laub (1993) and Graham and Bowling (1995), these interviews will be analysed for the chronological occurrence of a variety of transitional events which might be causally correlated to the cessation of criminal involvement, such as the following:

- completion of education program
- gaining stable employment
- being in a marriage/partner relationship
- becoming a parent
- leaving the parental home
- taking responsibility for oneself or others
- gaining financial independence and a degree of autonomy

The Life Story Interview can also be thematically "content-coded" for psychosocial content, and quantified to make systematic cross-case comparisons in types of identity stories (though not necessarily 'types' of people).

Stewart *et al* (1988) provide one of the most useful coding schemes for measuring an individual's major developmental concerns by using life story data. Based on Erikson's (1959) theory of adult development, this coding system scores individuals' levels of concentration on various aspects of identity, intimacy and generativity. If Erikson's personological explanation for criminal behaviour are correct, persisters should still be attempting to resolve issues of identity. Desisters, on the other hand, may exhibit higher levels of intimacy and generativity in their self-narratives. Desister narratives should also better organised, with past experiences leading naturally to present behaviours, while persister narratives are likely to be highly disorganised with no believable story of the self.

Also of interest in the coding of life story data will be the issue of 'neutralisation' of delinquency - a major criminological theory based on the idea of offender self-concept (Sykes and Matza, 1957). Modifying a version of Schonbach's (1990) Taxonomy of Accounting Strategies independent coders will measure the usage of justifications and excuses by narrators in their explanations of past behaviour. Desisters may be more likely to assume more personal responsibility and make fewer excuses for past crimes than offenders. One of the factors in the process of desistance may involve reversing the neutralisation of offences and accepting past mistakes as one's own.

Ethnographic Fieldwork

In order to avoid what is referred to as 'psychologism' - or the divorcing of individuals from their social and historical context (Mills, 1959) - the data generated by the desistance interviews will be supplemented with eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork at a variety of rehabilitation and resettlement programmes in the Merseyside area. This on-going fieldwork has included formal and informal interviews with ex-offenders, current offenders, police officers, social workers, prison staff, and probation officers concerning the process and possibility of offender reform, and their own strategies or theories in regards to promoting the rehabilitation of offenders. Fieldworkers have also been allowed to observe numerous one-on-one and group counselling and training sessions for ex-offenders. Finally, a subsample of both the desister and persister groups have agreed to an extended period of 'observation', introducing fieldworkers to family and friends, and allowing a more complete understanding of their day-to-day lives.

The Second Wave

Finally, an effort is underway to contact a portion of the original interview participants, from both the persisting and the desisting groups, approximately twelve months after the date of their first interview, to find out whether they have been able to abstain from crime or narcotics use over the last year. This second wave of interviews will allow a prospective element to the research design that can act as a further test of the ability for strong 'reform story' narratives to support desistance. This follow-up will also allow researchers to explore why some desisters recycle back into criminal behaviour (see also Burnett, 1992).

Summary

Almost 60 years ago, Glueck and Glueck (1940: 270) urged researchers to 'dissect maturation into its components,' yet surprisingly little is known how the process of desistance actually 'works.' Narrative studies offer a potent, systematic framework for studying the human change process from the perspective of the individual. The small-scale LDS employs this narrative framework in order to provide a comprehensive, multi-level portrait of the psychosocial correlates of desistance and persistence for a small sample of urban offenders. Of particular interest will be how these portraits of ex-offenders' self-concepts compare to existing ontogenetic and sociogenic explanations of desistance. Ideally, if policy researchers gain a better understanding about how the internal process of reform works, they can better design policies and programs that can support offender rehabilitation and reintegration.

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