



Desistance Across the Life Course: Editorial Introduction

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Often marginalised when compared against other key points of focus for criminal career research, interest in desistance as a priority for both research and theorising has arguably come of age. Less than two decades ago, researchers decried the disproportionate focus on key aspects of offending (e.g. recidivism), and dimensions of criminal careers (e.g. onset, persistence, escalation) in making the point that further research and theorising on desistance was required [2]. The response to and production of this special issue on desistance across the life course is a tangible illustration that research interests on desistance have strengthened over time.

While research and theorising on desistance has not necessarily exploded over the past two decades, there has been a demonstrable increase in both areas. The advancing of theoretical discussions and debates about desistance, its conceptualization, and various measurement challenges illustrates the emerging intellectual richness of this topic. An interest in soliciting and gauging current research on desistance is what prompted our focus on this topic for the JDLCC and we were heartened by the very strong interest in the topic as expressed by the numerous submissions received. Indeed, the initial call for expressions of interest for papers in 2017 received an overwhelming and unprecedented response such that we will be producing two separate special issues on this topic.

But our interest in showcasing desistance research is not simply motivated by the fact that there are now numerous scholars engaged in this area of inquiry. To the contrary, the area of offending termination and desistance is now generating rich theoretical debates about the nature and processes of desistance and the role of human agency as well as identity changes among other mechanisms. Indeed, the significance of further understanding the process of desistance across differing levels and contexts is fostering a plethora of important research. And beyond theoretical comparisons, substantive debates over conceptualizations, measurement, and background assumptions (cf Paternoster [3] and Cullen [1] in this journal) illustrate the richness of this area of inquiry.

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As editors, we are delighted with the interest in this topic for the JDLCC. Indeed, showcasing research on desistance illuminates opportunities for advancing theoretical clarification and furthering understanding of processes of desistance and related mechanisms while at the same time providing clarity on issues related to causal processes and temporal ordering, the role and timing of identify changes, the issue and impact of choice, and human agency, as well as the role of ageing in relation to desistance. Ultimately building further knowledge and understanding on the mechanisms and machinations of offending termination and desistance is instrumentally useful when considering how we, as a society respond to offending across and through the life-course. Indeed, improved understanding of desistance and related processes bodes well for accelerating the mechanisms of desistance in future. In closing, the collection of papers in this special issue illustrate the emerging sophistication of desistance research and go some way toward filling existing gaps in the current levels of knowledge and understanding.

Overview

The first paper in this special issue is by Gary Sweeten and Natasha Khade and is titled ‘Equifinality and desistance: Which pathways to desistance are the most travelled?’. In this research, Sweeten and Khade embrace the idea of equifinality in relation to desistance. The core argument of the equifinality thesis is that individuals reach the same end state by a variety of causal processes. Instead of testing one particular theoretical model for its superiority over another, this approach allows for multiple causal pathways to contribute to the outcome of desistance. In this particular study, the researchers used data from the US-based pathways to desistance study to examine social bonds, changes in identity, social costs and rewards of crime, psychosocial maturity and social learning from peers. Results showed that the latter three of these factors changed more rapidly among desisters when compared to those classified as persisters in this study. This particular methodological approach provides a useful framework for testing the multiple postulates of developmental and life-course criminology.

In the second paper, ‘Exploring the transition to parenthood as a pathway to desistance’, Leslie Abell focuses on a number of different elements of parenthood and how these relate to desistance from self-reported offending also using data from the US pathways to desistance study. Results show that the females in the sample are less likely to report engaging in aggressive offending, but not income related offending, when they are pregnant. A similar but weaker effect is observed for males when they have become fathers. Abell argues that it is not parenthood itself that leads to desistance and that it requires a ‘respectability package’ which includes the timing of transition to parenthood, residency with the child and parental orientation.

In their paper, ‘Desistance in custody? The short and long-term impact of custody experiences on offending outcomes’, Evan Clark McCuish, Patrick Lussier, and Ray Corrado use data from the Canadian Incarcerated Serious and Violent Young Offender Study. This is a study of young people who are incarcerated in institutions which include rehabilitation and service delivery as part of their legislated remit. The researchers explored factors theoretically expected to be related to desistance, including

length of incarceration, victimisation while incarcerated, informal social control and identity change. They found that physical victimisation while in custody contributed to further offending rather than acting as a shock that may promote desistance. Longer periods of incarceration and strong social bonds to custodial staff and family were found to be related to lower levels of subsequent violent offending. Very few of the young people exhibited a positive identity change as a result of their incarceration. The authors provide a well-considered discussion regarding why these relationships may have been observed and the implications of these for custodial settings.

Dena Carson draws on data from seven cities in the USA, both a large quantitative study and in-depth qualitative interviews, to examine the push and pull factors related to gang membership in her paper 'Examining racial and ethnic variations in reasons for leaving a youth gang'. Her research demonstrates that the various push and pull factors differ based on the racial group. Pull factors examined include prosocial friends and relationships, informal social control of parents and formal institutions such as juvenile justice. Push factors included maturation, disillusionment with gang behaviour and violent victimisation. Many racial differences were uncovered and discussed. For example, white youth were more commonly able to access pull motivations for leaving gangs and black youth were less likely to experience the pull factor of prosocial friends. The research contributes to better understanding racial differences for leaving a gang.

In another qualitative study, Marieke Liem and Daan Weggemans examined a sample of Dutch high profile offenders and another sample of professionals involved in their reintegration in their paper 'Reintegration among high-profile ex-offenders'. Those people who had previously offended in their sample did not reoffend but they faced difficulties across the domains of family relations, parenthood, intimate partner relationships, employment and housing post-release. These domains of informal social control that are theoretically expected to facilitate desistance from offending were not accessible to these people given the strict supervision and public visibility they experienced.

Another Dutch study 'Managing risk or supporting desistance? A longitudinal study on the nature and perceptions of parole supervision in the Netherlands', included men who were interviewed three times; firstly in prison and then up to 1 year after release from prison. The authors of this study, Jennifer Doekhie, Esther van Ginneken, Anja Dirkwager, and Paul Nieuwbeerta, observed the tensions between what the parole officers did (worked with parolees in a case-worker model to strengthen factors known to foster desistance) and the perceptions of those individuals they supervised who saw the experience as surveillance-oriented. The researchers found that parole was most beneficial when parole officers were viewed as social workers or mentors and this is more commonly associated with relational and identity desistance (rather than just act desistance/non-offending).

The final paper in this special issue is titled 'Mapping the age of official desistance: Implications for research and policy' and was written by Elaine Eggleston Doherty and Bianca Bersani. The focus of this paper is the latter half of the age crime curve when many adolescents and adults desist from crime. It synthesises data from 15 studies in the USA in order to identify the age of the last criminal justice system contact. Doherty and Bersani find that the age of desistance is clustered on average in the late 1920s and early 1930s. They discuss the implications of this finding in terms

of US policy, and also the implications for developmental and life-course criminology research and theory.

The collection of manuscripts in this special issue illustrate the diversity of desistance research which bodes well for building a more comprehensive knowledge base for the future. That this topic received such an unprecedented response illuminates the point that a range of researchers across the world have a specific interest, indeed focus on building knowledge on desistance from offending while embracing a developmental and life-course approach. Clearly, this bodes well for advancing knowledge and understanding about this key aspect of offending across the life-course.

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