Understanding Desistance: A Critical Review of Theories of Desistance[i]

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ABSTRACT

Informed by a comprehensive review of theories and research into desistance (Weaver, 2015), this article advances a critical and contemporary overview of the main theories of desistance, drawing on illustrative empirical research. It begins by addressing definitional issues, prior to showing how various theories of desistance differently explain the phenomena of giving up crime. The article concludes by engaging with its limitations and its relatively muted impact on policy and practice. It is argued that desistance research, and its interpretation in both policy and practice, remains very individualistic in focus, and often disconnected from specific analyses of the cultural and structural contexts in which both offending and desistance take place. In considering how this review might inform future research, the article suggests that the desistance paradigm might be enhanced by attending to contemporary critiques of its limitations. In particular, this would suggest the application of intersectional methods and analyses, analyses of divergences in desistance pathways by crime type, enhanced critical and contextualizing analyses of cultural and structural influences on desistance, and, beyond individual desistance, a focus on the challenges of social integration for people with convictions, to better inform and shape penal policy and practice.

KEYWORDS: Desistance; Literature Review; Giving Up Crime; Understanding Desistance; Theories of Desistance

Introduction

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The study of desistance is distinct in criminology, in seeking to explain why people cease and sustain cessation from offending, rather than why they offend. This article offers a critical review of theories of desistance, drawing on empirical research where relevant. It begins by addressing definitions of desistance, prior to presenting an overview of the principal theoretical explanations of desistance, and latterly engaging with its limitations and its impact on policy and practice. It is argued that desistance research, and its interpretation in both policy and practice, remains very individualistic in focus, and all too often disconnected from specific analyses of the cultural and structural contexts in which both offending and desistance take place. Key areas for the development of this research paradigm reside in the application of intersectional methods and analyses, analyses of divergences in desistance pathways and processes by crime type; enhanced critical and contextualizing analyses of cultural and structural influences on both crime and desistance; and, beyond individual desistance, a focus on the challenges of social integration for people with convictions, to better inform and shape penal policy and practice.

Definitions of desistance

Debates surrounding definitions of desistance reflect the diversity of theoretical conceptualizations of desistance and the challenges of empirically measuring desistance. While the term implies abstinence from offending, criminologists have expanded on this to refer to the process by which people come to cease and sustain cessation of offending behavior (e.g. Bushway et al., 2001; Laub and Sampson, 2001; Maruna, 2001).

Shover (1996 p.121) defines desistance as 'the voluntary termination of serious criminal participation', suggesting that minor incidences of offending does not preclude desistance. While empirically vague, it recognizes that desistance is not only a process but that participation in low level offending is not uncommon. Most empirical measures of desistance, however, emphasize the state of non-offending rather than the process of desistance leading up

to that point, typically identifying individuals who evidence a significant crime-free gap in the course of a criminal career, essentially redefining desistance as temporary non-offending[ii]. This is due to the practical challenges of verifying permanent cessation of offending (e.g. Bottoms et al., 2004), which, it has been suggested, can only be established posthumously (Maruna and Farrall, 2004). Bushway et al., (2001) argue that a focus on the final state of non-offending neglects to address the process by which individuals arrive there. Alternatively, they propose that desistance should be construed as the study of change in criminality (defined as propensity to offend), implicit in qualitative accounts of desistance.

The process of desistance has been characterized in terms of oscillations between conformity and criminality in both empirical studies and theoretical accounts of desistance (Glaser, 1964; Matza, 1964)[iii] and as encompassing distinguishable phases. Uggen and Kruttschnitt (1998) suggest that desistance has two implicit components: a change from offending to non-offending and the arrival at a permanent state of non-offending. Although the idea of permanency is problematic, the notion of graduated or distinguishable phases in the process of desistance is not without its precedents or antecedents (e.g. Fagan, 1989[iv]; Loeber and LeBlanc, 1990[v]; Weitekamp and Kerner, 1994[vi]). Laub and Sampson (2001 p.11) differentiate between 'termination' (the outcome, 'the time at which criminal activity stops' (ibid, p. 11)), and 'desistance' ('the causal process that supports the termination of offending' (ibid, p. 11)). Maruna and Farrall (2004) argue that this conflates the causes of desistance with desistance itself, alternatively proposing a dichotomous definition, analogous with Lemert's (1951) conception of primary and secondary deviance. They propose that there are two distinguishable phases in the desistance process: primary and secondary desistance. Primary desistance refers to any crime free gap in the course of a criminal career. Secondary desistance is defined as the movement from the behaviour of non-offending to the adoption of a non-offending role or identity (Maruna and Farrall, 2004). More recently, McNeill (2016) proposed the concept of

tertiary desistance to denote social recognition of change and the development of a sense of belonging. While not intended to be sequential or linear stages in the desistance process, the language of primary, secondary and tertiary is all too often, erroneously, interpreted as such. For this reason, Nugent and Schinkel (2016: 570) propose more descriptive classifications to characterize the same processes, specifically ''act-desistance' for non-offending, 'identity desistance' for the internalization of a non-offending identity and 'relational desistance' for recognition of change by others'. It is now generally accepted that desistance is a process, rather than an end-point, and the conceptualization of the desistance process delineated by Nugent and Schinkel (2016) is perhaps the clearest in describing and distinguishing between key elements of the process, without implying a sense of linearity.

Theories of desistance

Criminological interest in desistance developed in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Cusson and Pinsonneault, 1986; Meisenhelder, 1977, Rand, 1987; Shover, 1983) and became a major area of enquiry in criminal career research in the 1990s (e.g. Graham and Bowling, 1995; Maruna, 1997; Sampson and Laub, 1993). Since this time, a range of theories and empirical studies that seek to account for and explain desistance have been advanced. Whilst there are commonalities across theories of desistance, not least in their conceptualization of desistance as a process of change, they differ in their explanations as to how a person comes to desist, and what supports it. For the purpose of classification the theories of desistance are presented under four broad headings. The first three echo the classificatory distinctions drawn by Maruna (1997) and Barry (2010): namely, individual and agentic; social and structural; and interactionist. The fourth, situational, reflects Bottoms' (2014) more recent assertion that the spatial and situational aspects of desistance deserve attention in their own right. 'Individual and agentic' theories are based on the established links between age and certain criminal behaviors, locating explanations of desistance within age and maturational reform theories (or 'ontogenic

theories'); agentic explanations of desistance informed by rational choice theories are also subsumed under this category given their emphasis on within-individual cognitive processes. 'Social and Structural' theories include social bonds and social control (or 'sociogenic') theories which, generally, advance an association between desistance and circumstances 'external' to the individual (although these include the individual's reaction to, and interaction with, those circumstances). Such theories emphasize the significance of ties to family, employment or educational programs, which are considered to create a stake in conformity. 'Interactionist' theories include those that attend, to varying degrees, to the interaction between individual agency and social structures in their accounts of desistance. Interactionist theories broadly emphasize the significance of subjective changes in the person's sense of self and identity, and as part of that, their aspirations, in response to their (changing) social contexts. More recently, Bottoms (2014) fourth classification: 'situational desistance' illustrates how various aspects of people's social environments and situated 'routine activities' also influence behavior.

Individual and Agentic Theories of Desistance

The Age Crime Curve

Criminal careers research suggests that people begin offending in early adolescence, that rates of offending peak in late adolescence or young adulthood and that most people stop offending before reaching 30 or 40 years of age, thus construing offending primarily as an age-related phenomenon (e.g. Blumstein and Cohen, 1987; Farrington, 1986, 1997). The aggregate age-crime curve (calculated by dividing the total number of arrests of individuals of a given age by the total population size of the specific age) indicates a sharp increase in arrest rates in the early teen years, peaking in the late teen or early adult years, and decreasing over the remaining age distribution. Such studies consistently report that the age distribution of any population is

inversely related to its crime rate (e.g. Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1983; Steffensmeier and Harer, 1987).

Debates surrounding this relationship between age and crime hinge on whether the analysis of *individual-level* data evidences the same relationship between age and crime as the analysis of *aggregate* data. Hirschi and Gottfredson (1983) argue that crime is universally inversely related to age at both the individual and aggregate levels of analysis; the relationship between age and crime is considered to be invariant, meaning that all people, everywhere, within any historical period tend to commit less crime as they age regardless of both crime type and individual criminal propensity. Blumstein and others (Blumstein and Cohen, 1979, 1987; Blumstein et al., 1986; Blumstein, Cohen and Farrington 1988; Farrington, 1983, 1986), however, argue that this does not pertain at the individual level of analysis. Rather, they contend that Hirschi and Gottfredson confuse changes in participation and incidence rates with changes in the frequency of individual offending. A change in either participation or incidence rates affects the shape of the curve. As long as people are still active they may continue to commit crimes at a relatively constant rate independent of their age; thus, it is argued, changes in aggregate crime rates are likely to reflect changes in prevalence (see Farrington, 1986; 1997). Although the aggregate age-crime curve is largely driven by changes in the prevalence of offending, there remains some disagreement about how the rate of offending changes across the life-span for those actively involved in offending, and how this may vary by both offence type and gender. For instance, Loeber et al., (2016) using self-report data from the Pittsburgh Youth Study found that frequency of offending for men who were active in offending largely followed the characteristic age-crime curve. They also identified three age crime trajectories for girls: non-offenders, low rate and high rate. The frequency of offending for those in the high rate category gradually increased between the ages of 11 and 15, incrementally decreasing thereafter and

they were much more versatile in their offending than those in the low rate category, engaging in both violent and acquisitive crime.

Moreover, the age crime curve does not reflect divergences across or within crime types. There is some evidence to suggest that the traditional age crime curve does not reflect patterns of participation in white collar crime (e.g. Piquero and Benson, 2004), and more recent research has identified divergences in offending patterns and criminal trajectories across a sample of people convicted of white collar crime (e.g. Onna et al., 2014). While the age crime curve indicates that age leads to reductions in sex offending behavior, onset and desistance tends to occur later than the trajectories implied by the traditional age-crime curve and evidence suggests variations in age-graded trajectories by offence-type and differential rates of recidivism and desistance within these categories (for a detailed review of this literature, see Laws and Ward 2011).

Maturational Reform

'Ontogenic' or 'maturational reform' theories also conclude that people naturally grow out of crime. One of the earliest and largest longitudinal studies of crime and desistance was undertaken by the Gluecks (Glueck and Glueck, 1940). Their theory of maturational reform proposed that 'the physical and mental changes which enter into the natural process of maturation offer a chief explanation of improvement of conduct with passing years' (Glueck and Glueck, 1974 p.149). Thus, for the Gluecks, desistance was not only unaffected by socio-structural factors but was normative and expected, with exceptions being explained by immaturity. Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) similarly suggest that '[s]pontaneous desistance is just that, change in behaviour that cannot be explained and change that occurs regardless of what else happens' (p. 136, quoted in Laub and Sampson 2001 p.40). They attribute decreases in offending over time to biological changes which slow down the individual, reducing the motivation and capacity to re-offend. More recent versions of 'maturational' approaches have

focussed on developing neurobiological systems, rather than biological capacity per se. For example, Shulman et al., (2016) review evidence from developmental psychological and developmental neuroscientific, neuro-imaging research. They conclude that both psychological and neural manifestations of reward sensitivity increase between childhood and adolescence, peaking in late adolescence, and decline thereafter. On the other hand, psychological and neural reflections of improved cognitive control increase gradually and linearly throughout adolescence and early adulthood. What this suggests is that adolescents are more prone than other age groups to engage in risk-taking behavior.

While providing important insights into the biological and maturational processes that can affect cognition and behavior, such perspectives fail to take account of life-course events or any socio-structural, situational or institutional influences. Bushway et al., (2001) argue that understanding desistance as a process rather than as an end-point problematises the idea of age as a causal explanation of desistance, particularly from a developmental perspective. As Maruna (1997 p.3) put it, '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'. Focusing on ageing and maturation as a universal or natural phenomenon also fails to accounts for differences in individuals' pathways to desistance. Critically, it divorces the individual from the context within which these developmental changes occur by ignoring the role of relational, cultural, social or structural processes.

Rational Choice Theories

Rational choice theories (Clarke and Cornish, 1985; Cornish and Clarke, 1986) suggest that an individual's decisions to desist are motivated by the pursuit of an alternative future that does not involve offending (e.g. Paternoster, 1989; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009; Soyer, 2014), perhaps due to an aversive experience (Haggard, Gumpert and Grann, 2001) or in response to an accumulation of unfavourable experiences (Cusson and Pinsonneault, 1986). Essentially,

this line of reasoning suggests that the decision to desist is based on a conscious reappraisal of the costs and benefits of crime.

In similar vein, Paternoster and Bushway (2009) developed an 'identity theory of criminal desistance' which is a principally cognitive, rational choice and individualistic model of the desistance process. They suggest that people make a conscious decision to change based on increasing dissatisfaction with their life, characterised as a 'crystallization of discontent' (p. 1121) which becomes conceptually linked by the person to an anticipated future, and weighed up against a self as a future non-offender. This recalculation induces motivation to change. In a departure from social and structural theories (discussed below) they view any movement towards 'social institutions' such as marriage or employment, for example, as coming *after* the process of (identity) change has been initiated. The authors reason that, after a decision to desist has been made, the desister engages in a deliberate and intentional realignment of their social network towards more pro-social others: However, in focusing on changes in network composition, and in polarizing social relations into either pro-social or anti-social others, the authors neglect to attend to the implications of changes in (existing) network dynamics and social relationships and their role in triggering, enabling and sustaining desistance (Weaver, 2015).

Theories of desistance that focus on age and maturation fail to account for differences in individuals' pathways to desistance and differences within and across crime types. They also elide the role of relational, cultural, social and structural processes, transitions and contexts. While, rational choice theorists recognise that the decision to desist is informed by individuals' experience of, and involvement, in wider social institutions and processes, no explanation is offered as to how such processes might exert a constraint on either people's decision-making or their capacities to realize these intentions. Nonetheless, rational choice perspectives usefully

depart from the determinism often implied by some theoretical accounts of desistance which focus on social and structural influences and which tend to attribute a more peripheral role to individual agency.

Social and Structural Theories

Social Learning Theories /Differential Association

Social learning frameworks, which offer explanations for involvement in and desistance from offending, suggest that factors associated with onset of offending cohere with those of desistance (e.g. Cromwell, Olson and D'Aunn,1991; Wright and Cullen, 2004; Warr, 1998). Factors associated with desistance include, for example, differential association with non-criminal peers and significant others, less exposure to, or opportunities to model or imitate, criminal behavior, the development of attitudes favorable to desistance, and differential reinforcement discouraging continued involvement in offending. The most important of these factors for desistance is, according to Warr (1998), disassociation or weakened ties to peer relations as a consequence of the transition to marriage. He contends that involvement in an intimate relationship reduces the amount of time spent with peers although he does not elaborate on how or why this occurs. Rather, his explanation coheres around the outcomes, suggesting that when an individual disassociates from their peer network they may lose both the motivation and the means of committing certain types of criminal behavior. Laub and Sampson (2001) suggest that in the absence of a mechanism explaining desistance from crime in Warr's analysis, alternative explanations for the observed relationship between marriage and desistance could account for this phenomenon.

Informal social control theories

Social control theorists suggest that informal ties to 'institutions of social control', whether family, education or employment, particularly in early adulthood, can encourage desistance (Laub and Sampson, 2003). Therefore, unlike maturational theories, this would imply that such transitional experiences are not necessarily universal and they can be under the control of the individual, in terms of getting married for example (Laub and Sampson, 2001). The theorist most closely identified with control theory is Hirschi (1969) but current formulations of control theory can be attributed to the framework developed by Matza (1964). Matza's (1964) notion of a 'drift' centred on attachment, or otherwise, to social bonds; he suggested that most young people engaged in offending are caught somewhere in between the social bonds of adulthood and peer subcultures without a deep attachment to either, and that where adult roles become available, young people are likely to desist. Laub, Nagin and Sampson (1998) emphasize the 'independent' and 'exogenous' impact of these bonds. They argue that these triggering events can occur, at least in part, by 'chance' (ibid p.225) or by 'default' (Sampson and Laub, 2004), rather than simply as an outcome of an individual's rational decision-making or personal preferences. More generally, they suggest that employment and marriage confer obligations and expectations on the individual that generate informal controls through a network of social bonds, regardless of prior individual differences in criminal propensity.

Theoretical explanations, however, have a tendency to generalize and over-simplify explanations of desistance where empirical research reveals a more nuanced, complex and contingent depiction of the sequencing, impacts and effects of key social relations at the level of the individual (for a review see Weaver, 2015). This body of research suggests that key life events such as marriage, parenthood or employment are indeed likely to be shaped by, although not necessarily causal of desistance. The socio-historical and cultural contexts of research samples have also come under increased scrutiny as a lens through which to understand the

impact of cultural, normative, transitional or developmental life course events on desistance since Laub and Sampson (1993) advanced their age graded life-course theory of crime based on the then ageing sample originally informing the Glueck's research in the 1940s (see for example Bersani, Laub and Nieuwbeerta, 2009; King, Massoglia and Macmillan, 2007; Lyngstad and Skardhamar, 2011; Monsbakken, Lyngstad and Skardhamar, 2012; Skardhamar and Savolainen, 2012; Savolainen, 2009). These and other studies draw attention to how different cultural and structural contexts and socio-economic changes affect how key social relations, such as marriage or employment are experienced, the normative expectations attributed to these social relations, and their related impacts on behavior.

Other critiques of informal social control theories refer to an over-reliance on male samples with research evidence suggesting that the impact of social ties to marriage and employment on criminality is less evident for women (Giordano et al., 2002; King et al., 2007; Kreager, Matsueda and Erosheva, 2010, Maruna, 1997). For example, Monsbakken et al., (2012) hypothesize that the different gendered social control effects of marriage on desistance might reflect the normatively-informed controls stemming from women's friendship and family networks throughout the life course; they argue that for women, marriage heralds no new mechanisms of social control and therefore engenders less change promotive effects. Similarly problematizing a social control interpretation of the role of employment in influencing behavioral change is Skardhamar and Savolainen's (2012) quantitative research on the timing of behavioural change and participation in employment, which identified that employment emerged *after* individuals had ceased offending. Rather than triggering desistance, Skardhamar and Savolainen suggest that participation in employment emerges as a consequence of desistance. Indeed, it is increasingly acknowledged that employment in and of itself does not produce or trigger desistance as theories of informal social control imply; rather it is the

meaning and outcomes of either the nature and/or quality of the work or participation in employment and how these influence an individual's self-concept and social identity and how these interact with a person's priorities, goals and relational concerns that can explain this relationship (Weaver, 2015).

What the theoretical frameworks discussed thus far share is recognition of the various correlations between, for example, marriage, parenthood, employment and desistance but their impacts and effects are often explained in reference to a variety of criminological theories and, in particular, life course (Loeber and Le Blanc, 1990), rational choice (Cusson and Pinsonneault 1986, Paternoster and Bushway, 2009), social control (Laub and Sampson, 2003; Sampson and Laub, 1993) and social learning theories (Warr, 1998). While social and structural theories variously recognize and explain the role of social institutions in the desistance process, they fail to illuminate how social structures or institutions shape decisions, under-analyzing, if not neglecting, how the individual perceives and responds to such influences, to which interactionist theories attend.

Interactionist Theories

The preceding analysis has illustrated that desistance cannot be readily reduced to the influence of either internal or external factors. Indeed, an increasing number of desistance theories conceptualize the desistance process as an interaction between, or integration of, agentic and structural factors, drawing on narrative accounts of individuals' desistance processes. In these 'interactionist' theories, desistance occurs as the outcome of an individual seeking to alter their socio-structural context, and in so doing acquiring new behaviors and new pro-social roles, or vice versa, variously resulting in associated shifts in the individual's personal and social identity (see for example Bottoms et al., 2004; Dufour et al., 2013; Farrall, 2002; Farrall,

Bottoms and Shapland, 2010; Giordano et al., 2002; Healy, 2013; Maruna, 2001; Maruna and Farrall 2004; Uggen, Manza and Behrens, 2004). These theories of desistance place differing emphases on the role of individuals and their social contexts, tending to place explanatory weight on the discovery and exercise of agency and changes in personal identity and perceptions of social identity. Rather than, for example, analyzing how employment exerts informal social control, theories under this classification recognize that employment plays a significant role in shaping personal and social identities, which has important effects on people's behaviors (Weaver, 2015).

Desistance theorists have sought to identify which changes at the level of personal cognition (see for example Giordano et al., 2002) or self-identity and self-concept (Burnett, 1992; Graham and Bowling, 1995; Maruna 1997; Shover, 1996) might precede or coincide with changes in social bonds (LeBel et al., 2008). In contrast to control theories, cognitive or agentic explanations suggest that role transitions occur 'subsequent to the emergence of a cognitive openness to change that spurs interest in both marriage and reform' (Siennick and Osborn, 2008 p.169-70) (see relatedly Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). LeBel et al., (2008) relatedly reasoned that 'subjective changes may precede life-changing structural events and, to that extent, individuals can act as agents of their own change' (ibid p. 155).

Such theories suggest that 'turning point'[vii] events may have a different impact depending on the actors' level of motivation, on readiness to reform, and on their interpretation or assignation of meaning to the events. Giordano et al., (2002), for example, develop a symbolic interactionist[viii] perspective on desistance as a counterpoint to Sampson and Laub's (1993) theory of informal social control using a mixed method study design which included life history narratives to propose a four-part theory of 'cognitive transformation to 'provide more specificity about mechanisms of change' (Giordano et al., 2002 p.1004). Giordano et al., (2002 p.1000) argue that the desistance process involves the following four stages:

1. '…a shift in the actor's basic openness to change';

2. '…one's exposure to a particular hook or set of hooks for change' (ibid p.1000) and 'one's attitude toward [it]' (ibid p.1001).

3. The envisioning and fashioning of 'an appealing and conventional 'replacement self'' (ibid p. 1001);

4. '…a transformation in the way the actor views the deviant behaviour or lifestyle itself' (ibid p.1002).

Giordano et al., (2002 p.1026) state: 'on a continuum of advantage and disadvantage, the real play of agency is in the middle'; thus, agency is most significant where the objective odds of desisting are evenly balanced. Where this balance is offset other factors appear to be of greater importance. However, while Giordano et al's (2002) theory, and indeed, many principally agentic theories of the change process, can elaborate the early stages of desistance, they cannot explain what triggers this cognitive transformation, or why one institution at one time rather than another exerts this effect, or why people remain in marriages or in jobs during challenging times when his or her investment in these social relations has diminished.

King's (2014) critical realist analysis draws on Emirbayer and Mische (1998) to reveal the dynamics of agency in the early stages of desistance based on the accounts of 20 people subject to probation supervision. Notably, he reveals the processes which led towards a decision to attempt to desist; the intended strategies that individuals considered in order to sustain desistance; the anticipated obstacles that individuals believed they would encounter and how they intended to overcome these. King reasons that during the transitional phases, individuals may begin to construct strategies for future action triggered by their perceived need for change and/or as an outcome of their reflection on their personal and social circumstances. In a departure from preceding research into the early phases of desistance (e.g. Healy, 2012), King's

research revealed that the nature of agency in the transition to desistance is active and mutable; people adjust their goals and their strategies for realizing these goals in the light of incoming information and may, in turn, adjust their preferences accordingly. This reordering of preferences is, then, the result of a reappraisal of goals in accordance with their assessment of the possibilities and potentials that inhere in their social contexts. King therefore observes that individuals' priorities change in accordance with the availability (or otherwise) of certain roles and resources, which produce different forms of agency and which result in different forms of action. Unlike rational choice theories, then, agency here is context dependent; agency is conditioned by an individual's social context which delimits the range of future possibilities available by variously enabling or constraining change. However, while King's analysis offers important insights into the relationships between agency, structure, identity, reflexivity and the desistance process, he is unable to explain what triggers this reflexive process in the first place.

Following an evaluative review of agency-centered theories of desistance, Healy (2013 p.7) proposes an integrated framework for conceptualizing agency which also 'elaborates on the mechanisms that operate at the intersection between structure and agency' utilising Cote's (1997) identity capital model. While Healy's discussion does much to advance insights into concepts and constructs of agency, its interconnections with structures and its application to studies of desistance, like many other integrated accounts, it retains a somewhat solitary view of the self. While social bonds and social roles are referred to as enablements or constraints in identity formation and change, in its somewhat instrumental, resource-based formulation, the elision of the relational in Cote's identity capital thesis (and, therefore Healy's (2013) application of this in a desistance context) is arguably a significant short-coming, not least in its neglect to attend to how social relations motivate, enable or constrain decision-making and action and contribute to identity formation and change.

While, then, there is some consensus across desistance research that social relations, such as friendship groups, marriage, parenthood, and employment have a role to play in variously constraining, enabling and sustaining desistance, few desistance studies adequately analyze the dynamics or properties of social relations, or their relationship to individuals and social structures. Moreover, while, there is consensus that the desistance process is an outcome of the interplay between the agent and their structural context, the methodological focus is generally on individuals rather than groups even though the collective context within much offending takes place is well established (Weaver, 2015). This methodological focus on the individual precludes an analysis of the role of the group, as a social relation in and of itself, in shaping and affecting offending and desistance, and thus of how individual, relational, cultural and social contexts influence onset, persistence, and desistance. There is therefore a significant gap in criminological understanding of the impact that friendship groups (among other social relations) can exert on criminal careers – both empirically and theoretically. Weaver's (2015) study of *Offending and Desistance* sought to address this gap in knowledge and understanding by exploring the role of a co-offending peer group in shaping and influencing offending and desistance by revealing the relational dynamics of co-offending and desistance through an exploration of the relationships between a naturally forming peer group and the wider social relations in which they individually and collectively participated over the life course. In taking social relations as a central unit of analysis, rather than solely the individual agent and/or social structure, through the lens of Donati's (2011) relational realist social theory, this study identified the individual, relational, and structural contributions to the desistance process as they occur within and between individuals and, as part of that, the role of social relations in accounting for desistance over time. It showed how, for different individuals, these social relations (friendship groups, intimate relationships and families of formation, employment and religious communities) triggered reflexive evaluation of their priorities, behaviours and

lifestyles but with differing results. However, despite these differences, desistance from crime was a means of realising and maintaining the men's individual and relational concerns (such as acquiring employment, sustaining and important intimate relationship, and/or being and becoming a father), with which continued offending became (sometimes incrementally) incompatible.

The emphasis on concepts and constructs of agency and identity across interactionist theories, offers an important corrective to the comparatively deterministic accounts of desistance implied in age-graded, social learning and informal social control theories. In focusing on the interaction between structure and agency, they advance understandings of desistance beyond the rational choice and cognitive explanations advanced under 'Individual Theories' to illuminate the role of social structures in enabling or constraining agency. However, few accounts of the role of agency in the desistance process elaborate either what the process of reflexivity entails or how this process of reflexivity contributes to identity formation and change (notable exceptions include Dufour, Brassard and Martel, 2013; King, 2014, Weaver, 2015). In so doing, many such theories fail to consider how, exactly, individuals' reasoning and actions are variously enabled or constrained by the relational, cultural and social contexts within which these processes are embedded, and, arguably, this remains a limitation in and of desistance research.

Situational theories

While drawing on and informed by interactionist theories of desistance, Bottoms, (2014) observes that the situational and spatial dynamics of desistance, while barely featuring in the criminal careers literature, deserve attention in their own right. As Flynn (2010) observed, criminality is decidedly situational in terms of the influences that social structures and social

relations, which inhere in the places that people inhabit, exert on various dimensions of their lives. Places, then, 'are important generators of actions and not merely venues in which actions are performed' (Bottoms and Wiles, 1992 cited by Farrall et al., 2014 p.160). In this vein, Bottoms (2014) reasons that people's behavior can change when one or more features of their surrounding environment is altered, which might include for example changes in places of residence, the avoidance of criminogenic places and spaces and disassociation from peers who offend. Bottoms (2014) associates situational desistance with a particular form or manifestation of agency termed self-binding or diachronic self-control which is manifest in attempts to control potential future courses of action by consciously imposing certain constraints on one's movements and associations which resonates with, although inverts, theories of routine activity theories of crime.

Farrall et al., (2014) explore how desistance impacts on individuals' everyday activities, including the spaces and places in which these occur. Echoing Bottoms, they reason that 'desistance is not just about no longer offending, it is also about adopting a different set of routines which take individuals to very different places from when they used to offend' (ibid, p.160). Their analysis draws on geographies of time and space which explore the routine and rhythm of a day or week (or longer time period), and the spatial dimensions in which these routines occur, which, they recognize, are themselves shaped and influenced by wider social institutions. For example, they found that desisters, unlike persisters, 'appeared to consciously create routines for themselves and others' (Farrall et al., 2014 p.173) not least in terms of family routines or work related activities. While most of their persisters were unemployed, some persisters' lives were also structured around family responsibilities, but they observed a qualitative difference in levels of enthusiasm for, or 'emotional engagement' (ibid, p.174) in these routines reflecting levels of perceived voluntarism towards family roles and

responsibilities. They observed, thus, that shifts in 'time space routines' (ibid, p.164) reflect wider transformations in the spheres of family and work.

However, it is not just the place but the character of a place which is partly determined by its other inhabitants. 'The explanation given by the likes of Meisenhelder (1977) and Goffman (1963) is that the places where an individual lives out his or her life, communicate some element of 'who' they are and 'what' they do' (Farrall et al., 2014 p.162). Farrall et al., observe that routines also inform both personal and social identities to the extent that they communicate that there is something different about who they are now which can also inform ideas about who they can become in the future. In this vein, the authors identified a shift in people's relationships to and the meaning associated with specific places in accordance with both processes of change (i.e. in terms of avoiding specific places or accessing new ones) and processes of maturation (i.e. characterized by a shift in preferences). Thus, there is an important relationship between selfhood and place and the way in which place becomes imbued with meaning and in turn, the way in which place infers something of the self; in both senses identity is shaped through the social interactions that inhere in place and space (Farrall et al., 2014; Flynn, 2010). Farrall et al., (2014) conclude that the temporal and spatial dimensions of human activities 'reflect the interaction of one individuals' priorities, the priorities and requirements of the institutions they are engaged with, and the *longue duree* influences of 'historical' time (Farrall et al., 2014 p.164). In particular, they suggest that the spatial dynamics of desistance can be understood as working on two levels. 'Moves *within* towns or cities appeared to be part of the story of desistance for non-drug-injecting desisters, and were associated with moves away from particular parts of the city where crime was common and in which they had a name and a reputation to defend' (ibid, p.185). On the other hand, 'moves *between* towns or cities…were a feature of the narratives of reform for desisting drug users (and the opposite – that is locational stability and persistence – was observed too)' (ibid).

Situational theories, as a classification of theories of desistance, are less established and comparatively under-explored by empirical studies than those previously reviewed, but they have much in common with interactionist theories, in their attention to questions of identity and agency, and the interaction between agency and social contexts and the attendant effects on people's behaviours. At the same time, they add a new dimension to interactionist theories by focusing on the situational and spatial elements of desistance, that barely feature in other theories of desistance.

Concluding Discussion

This article has reviewed dominant theories of and research into desistance from crime, to produce a critical and comprehensive analysis of past and current thinking in this area. In so doing, the article has discussed the various definitions of desistance and the competing, yet often overlapping, theoretical explanations of desistance. Critically, no one theory can adequately explain how and why people stop offending in general, but each of the theories can shed light on aspects of the desistance process. How that process is both realised and experienced will, while sharing commonalities with other people, vary by individual. The dynamics of desistance thus have to be understood in the individual, relational, cultural and structural contexts within which these behaviours are embedded and sustained at the level of the individual. It has also been observed that in seeking to identify what supports desistance, theories of and research into desistance have paid considerably less attention to what constrains it (e.g. Farrall et al., 2014; Nugent and Schinkel, 2016).

Additional to the theories and research reviewed here is a smaller but important body of work that explores the impact and effects of correctional or criminal justice interventions on pathways to and processes of desistance and reintegration (for a brief review of this literature, see Weaver, 2015). To what extent desistance research has, in turn, adequately or effectively influenced and impacted on criminal justice policy and practice is debatable. It might be

suggested that it has, in the U.K at least, offered an important corrective to the otherwise risk focused and individualistic approaches that largely typify contemporary practice. By the same token, it might be argued that theories of desistance tend to overlook psychological and cognitive theories of change which have otherwise dominated approaches to rehabilitation in both policy and practice. It remains the case, however, that interpretations, in policy and practice, of desistance processes are prone to being over-simplified, generalized, decontextualized and individualistic which has left this body of research vulnerable to such critiques (Graham and McNeill, 2017). Like other terms, such as 'empowerment' or 'co-production', the appropriation and application of the terms 'desistance' and 'supporting desistance' means that it is often applied to very different activities, underpinned by different ideologies and objectives, and is, thus, at risk of being diluted and devalued where it is misapplied or misappropriated and this may account, in part, for the relatively limited impact that desistance research has had on policy and practice.

As Graham and McNeill (2017) suggest, some of the critiques advanced in relation to desistance research, (that it is individualistic in focus and lacks attention to issues of gender, race and class, for example) are based on a less than nuanced and detailed reading of this body of work. Desistance research has been critiqued for its relative neglect of, for example, white collar crime (though see Hunter, 2015; Onna et al., 2014). Similarly, comparatively few desistance studies attend to desistance from sex offending; of those that do, the focus is overwhelmingly on people convicted of sex offending against children (e.g. Hulley, 2016; Kewley 2016; McAlinden et al., 2016). As such, diversities within and across crime types remain undeveloped. Indeed, as this review has attempted to reveal, research in this paradigm is not without its limitations and, as such, would be enhanced by increased attention to issues of diversity, and the application of intersectional research methods and analyses; analyses of divergences in desistance pathways and processes by crime type; and to the production of

critical and contextualizing analyses of the cultural and structural influences on both crime and desistance. Moreover, the focus on abstinence from offending and the lack of attention to social integration beyond desistance, have led some to ask the critical question: 'what comes after desistance?' (e.g. Nugent and Schinkel 2016, Graham and McNeill, 2017). A less individualistic, and longer term focus on experiences of desistance, and beyond, might usefully emphasize and evidence the impacts and effects of systemic, as well as socio-structural, challenges to realising the social integration of people with convictions, which, in turn, might potentially better inform and shape penal policy and practice.

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[i] The author would like to thank Routledge for permission to reuse some of the material published in her book: Weaver, B (2015) *Offending and Desistance: The Importance of Social Relations.* Routledge

[ii] For an overview of operational definitions deployed in a range of empirical studies see Kazemian (2007)

[iii] For a discussion on the concept of intermittency, see Carlsson (2013)

[iv] Fagan (1989) defined desistance as the 'process of reduction in the frequency and severity of (family) violence, leading to its eventual end when 'true desistance' or 'quitting' occurs (ibid, p.380, quoted in Bushway et al., 2001).

[v] Loeber and LeBlanc (1990, p.409) specified four components of desistance: 'deceleration', 'specialization', 'de-escalation' and 'reaching a ceiling' thus conceptualising desistance overall as a process from more to less serious offending over time (LeBlanc and Loeber, 1998).

[vi] Weitekamp and Kerner (1994) define termination as the time when the criminal behaviour stops permanently; in contrast, suspension is defined as a break in offending behaviour. They therefore view desistance as a process by which offending decelerates and exhibits less variety.

[vii] As Carlsson (2012, p.4) elaborates, the impact of a 'turning point' is only really understood over time. To be clear, he argues that that it is not the event (i.e. work or marriage) that is in itself the change agent but the 'way such changes under certain circumstances bring about other changes' (Carlsson 2012 p.3). He conceptualises turning points as those 'crucial [processes] in which new lines of individual…activity are forged, in which new aspects of the self are brought into being (Becker 1966:xiv)'.

[viii] Symbolic interactionism suggests that people construct their identities as they evaluate others' attitudes towards them (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). This process occurs within and through social interactions which are, in particular, communicative exchanges.