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# Women's Desistance from Crime

## *The Role of Individual, Relational, and Socio-structural Factors over Time*

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### Introduction

Crime and, in particular, violent crime, committed early in life, can have long-term effects not only on the life of offenders (Jolliffe et al., 2017; Moffitt, 1993, 2006) but also on the life of its victims (e.g., Bouffard & Koeppl, 2014; Fagan, 2003). To “protect” potential victims and minimize long-term effects, crime prevention is the most preferable and effective investment to make. However, once criminal onset has occurred, focus should shift to desistance from crime, and efforts should be made to provide tailored interventions that contribute to this desistance process. In recent decades, an increasing number of scholars have tried to unravel the mechanisms underlying desistance (Giordano et al., 2002; Laub & Sampson, 2001, 2003; Loeber et al., 2007; Maruna, 2001) while other researchers have sought to incorporate the desistance paradigm within the correctional, probation, and social work domains (de Vries Robbé & Willis, 2017; Maruna et al., 2004; McCulloch, 2005; McNeill, 2006; Nee & Vernham, 2017; Polaschek, 2017). For an overview of desistance literature, see Bersani and Doherty (2018), Shapland et al. (2016), and Rocque (2017). Most studies, however, have mainly focused on male crime and on interventions developed for adolescent and adult males.

According to trend studies from countries in the European Union (Estrada et al., 2016; Wong et al., 2011) as well as the United States (Lauritsen et al., 2009; Steffensmeier et al., 2006), the gender gap in registered (violent) crime has reduced. Explanations for the decreasing gender gap vary from net-widening practices to declining crime rates of men convicted for crime. Explanations referring to an increase in violence among females are not confirmed by other data sources such as self-reports and victimization studies (Schwartz et al., 2009; Steffensmeier et al., 2005). Whether or not women have become more violent over the years, their numbers in prison have seen a dramatic rise over the last

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few decades in different countries throughout the world (Greene & Pranis, 2006; Jeffries, 2014; Jeffries & Newbold, 2016; Kruttschnitt & Gartner, 2003; McIvor, 2010; Slotboom et al., 2008). This upward trend in women's incarceration, however, could be explained by criminal justice policies, as was also suggested by authors examining the gender gap. Despite disagreement about explanations of the narrowing gender gap and rising female prison populations, these trends still leave us with the need to search for possible explanations for female desistance, which, in turn, may affect the type of interventions females need. It is therefore important to get a better understanding of female desistance.

Several different theories of desistance from crime have emerged in the last two decades and, depending on the age of the offender, different constructs were found to be important in the desistance process (e.g., Mulvey et al., 2004). While most desistance theories focus on the process of adults growing out of crime later in life, we know from the literature that the majority of adolescent offenders stop or decrease their activities in late adolescence and early adulthood (e.g., Bushway et al., 2001; Moffitt, 1993; Van der Geest et al., 2009). Longitudinal data also suggest that the desistance process differs for different groups of offenders, and male and female offenders desist differently (Nagin et al., 1995; Van der Geest et al., 2009; Wong et al., 2009).

In their literature review, Laub and Sampson (2001) summarized six plausible explanations of desistance from crime that can be broadly seen as changes that take place in individuals, relationships, contexts, or opportunities (Stouthamer-Loeber et al., 2004). These explanations have mainly been developed by studying male crime and male desistance. Moreover, almost all theoretical frameworks are seen as applicable to both male and female offenders. However, it is unclear whether these theoretical frameworks do in fact pertain to female offenders as well. We know, for example, that compared with men, female offenders face different challenges related to income, family responsibilities, and housing, and they have different victimization histories (Belknap & Holsinger, 2006; Spjeldnes & Goodkind, 2009). In this chapter we give an overview of the literature on correlates of desistance in female offenders. We will include relevant findings from a systematic review of the literature on female desistance that was recently completed by Rodermond et al. (2016). This review included 44 studies (quantitative and qualitative) on female desistance, which mostly concentrated on adult female offenders (around 80%). Desistance was measured as reductions in crime or no crime at all. Crime was measured by self-reports, arrest, and conviction record, and no distinction was made between specific types of crime.

We make a distinction between desistance processes during (the transition into) early adulthood on the one hand and adulthood (roughly from age 25 onwards) on the other because developmental processes and social experiences differ over the life course. In other words, factors related to desistance in late adolescence and early adulthood might be different from those influencing desistance during later phases of adulthood. Since several researchers have brought up the role and meaning of protective factors in desistance from crime (de Vries Robbé & Willis, 2017; Kewley, 2017; Langton, 2020; Nee & Vernham, 2017; Polaschek, 2017; Ward, 2017) we also included empirical literature on protective factors in our search for correlates of desistance. Finally, we searched for empirical evidence on how to measure (protective) factors that best predict desistance in females and how these measurements can be used in applied work.

In the following section we give an overview of the evidence found for predictors of female desistance in two age periods: the transition to early adulthood, and adulthood (above the age of 25). We will concentrate on dynamic factors enhancing the desistance

process because these factors are changeable features that can be included in interventions working toward desistance.

## Factors Related to Female Desistance

### Individual Factors

#### *Prosocial Identity Development*

Prosocial identity development, cognitive change, and maturation are seen as key elements in the psychologically oriented desistance theories. (The main theories in this domain refer to cognitive transformation, agency, identity change, and maturation as the most important theoretical concepts explaining desistance from crime, see Giordano et al., 2002; King, 2012; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Rocque, 2015.) However, changes in identity and (re)gaining a sense of agency and control over one's life have been studied, using qualitative methodology, with samples of adults. One of the few quantitative studies on the relation between identity change and desistance in early adulthood was conducted by Rocque et al. (2016). They used data from the Rutgers Health and Human Development Project (HHDP), which included measures of both personality identity and crime. The HHDP is a prospective longitudinal study in which individuals (mainly white and middle class) were followed from age 12 to age 30/31. Both males and females were followed over five waves from early adolescence to young adulthood. Personal identity, theoretically related to crime, was defined as the way a person thinks about themselves and expressed by items such as being a good person, being a mean person, or being someone who cannot be trusted and is dishonest. Crime and delinquency were measured by self-report and defined as a variety score on a number of items. It was shown that females have a higher level of prosocial identity than males and that their increase in prosocial identity was larger over time. Also, prosocial identity reached its plateau around age 25. It was also shown that identity was a robust predictor of desistance, controlling for covariates such as work, marriage, and parenthood. However, no separate analyses were done for males and females. Being male was only added as a covariate in the analyses. Of note, hardly any participants were married or had children before the age of 25. At least, as Rocque et al. (2016) suggested, changes in social controls such as work, marriage, or parenthood may not be enough to facilitate desistance from crime in the absence of identity change.

Another quantitative study that included identity to predict desistance is that of McCuish et al. (2020). In testing the integrated maturational theory, which describes psychosocial, adult role, and identity maturation as interrelated domains associated with desistance, the authors showed that for both young adult males and females interrelated concepts of maturation were related to desistance. They also concluded that although self-identity was an important aspect of maturation, it was not directly related to desistance. These results were based on the Data from the Pathways to Desistance Study with male ( $N = 1,170$ ) and female ( $N = 184$ ) youth with a history of offending. Participants were an average age of 14 at baseline and were followed for 7 years.

#### *Cognitive Transformations and Identity Change*

Some of the qualitative desistance studies on adult females from Rodermond et al. (2016) showed that cognitive transformations play a role in the desistance process in adult female life. McIvor et al. (2009), for example, interviewed 139 women (average age around 31)

imprisoned in a women's correctional center close to Melbourne, Australia, to explore women's experiences on release from prison. The main theme that could be discerned from desisters was the sense of personal agency and self-efficacy that was mentioned in the interviews.

Identity change was also found in a sample of offenders involved with serious drugs who were released from the state of Delaware correctional system between the years 1990 and 1996 (Bachman et al., 2016). Participants in the study were first interviewed while still incarcerated, approximately 9 months prior to release, and were re-interviewed after release at 6, 18, 42, and 60 months. The majority of the sample of 304 interviewed people were male (61%), African-American (61%), and had a mean age of 45 years. Bachman et al. (2016) found that most offenders who had self-reported desistance from both crime and substance misuse had transformed their offender identity into a non-offender identity. They motivated this change by referring to their worst fears, such as dying as an addict or dying alone in prison. In a follow-up study of 1,349 offenders (286 females) with past drug history, Liu and Bachman (2021) found that a positive self-identity directly inhibits crime independently of other factors such as employment and work. They found no differences between males and females. However, separate analyses were not done for females.

### *Personality Characteristics*

An increasing number of psychologically oriented scholars who study crime are interested in the relation between personality traits and desistance from antisocial behavior and crime. These scholars have argued that from late adolescence to early adulthood (a period that is characteristic for desistance from antisocial behavior) changes in personality traits such as greater self-regulation and impulse control are also very prominent (Morizot, 2015). However, very few empirical studies have reported on the relation between personality traits and desistance from crime in females. Blonigen (2010) found that both males and females who show a decrease in antisocial behavior between the ages of 18 and 25 show a significant decrease in novelty seeking (e.g., "I do things based on how I feel without thinking about how they were done in the past") and an increase in reward dependence (e.g., "I discuss my experiences and feelings openly with friends"). Even fewer studies have focused on desistance from violent behavior in females and its relation with personality changes. Cauffman et al. (2017) investigated the relation between psychosocial maturity (increase in impulse control) and patterns of violent behavior among females across adolescence and into adulthood. Data were derived from the Pathway to Desistance study, which started between 2000 and 2003 and followed participants for 7 years between the ages of 14 and 25. The sample included 172 males who were matched with 172 females. Both violence and impulse control were based on self-reports. Most females desisted from crime as they transitioned from adolescence into adulthood (75%), and those who desisted from violent crime developed more control over their impulses. In addition, they were also more likely to have a (full-time) job.

### *Drug Use*

Substance abuse plays an important role in the continuation of offending behavior (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2007), and therefore the reduction of drug and alcohol use may facilitate desistance from crime (although the relative neglect of drug use/disuse in theoretical work on desistance is noteworthy). There have been very few studies conducted, however, that have investigated the relation between substance use and female desistance in early

adulthood. Bright et al. (2017) analyzed data from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN) and used a cohort of adolescents at age 12 and two subsequent waves (age 15 and age 18). Females who were delinquent but not using drugs were likely to show a decrease in delinquent behavior over time, suggesting that among females there may have been a desistance process from delinquency. However, females who already were both delinquent and using alcohol and/or drugs at age 15 were more likely to have continued these behaviors at age 18. These findings suggest that desisting from delinquency may be less likely when substance use is an additional risk factor present. Among female youth this may be particularly important, as delinquent behavior in females who are not also using substances appears to be less common (Bright et al., 2017). Jamieson et al. (1999) used qualitative methodology to study young people between the ages of 18 and 25 and concluded that consuming drugs and needing (money for) drugs were regarded as contributing factors in the continuation of offending in young adult females.

With respect to adult female offenders, it was shown that reductions or terminations in consuming drugs seem to contribute to the desistance process in adult women as well (Rodermond et al., 2016). Benda (2005), for example, studied a sample of 600 bootcamp graduates (50% females) with an average age of 24 years. They were defined as desisters if they had no arrest or parole violations 5 years after release from the bootcamp. Especially for women in this sample, drug use predicted recidivism. Huebner et al. (2010) studied a sample of 506 incarcerated women with an average age of 34. Desistance was defined as no contact with the criminal justice system during the 8 years after release from prison. Huebner et al. found that women who were identified as drug dependent after release were more likely to fail on parole. Nearly one third of the women in the study sample who recidivated were dependent on drugs following release from prison. Qualitative studies added support in that many women attributed termination of offending to their success in avoiding drugs (Rodermond et al., 2016).

### *Mental Health*

Although the mental health of offenders is very often studied in different correctional and forensic settings (Burke et al., 2015; Fazel et al., 2016; Washburn et al., 2015), psychological and psychiatric problems are not directly incorporated into theories of desistance. However, it is known from the literature that mental health is a factor often implicated in pathways to offending and incarceration for females (DeHart et al., 2014; Joosen & Slotboom, 2015; Slotboom et al., 2011). It may very well be that mental health plays a role in the female desistance pathway as well.

Cauffman et al. (2015) studied both male and female trajectories of offending from ages 14–25 years using data from the Pathway to Desistance Project. Most of the young women in the study desisted over time. Among these violent female offenders, diagnosis of a mental health disorder (depression, post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD]) was linked with persistent offending. Those who desisted earlier did not have a diagnosis of a mental health disorder. Consequently, the absence of disorders seems to promote the desistance process. Interestingly, a meta-analysis studying the association between mental disorders and juvenile recidivism disclosed that females with an internalizing disorder were at a lower risk for recidivism than females without such a disorder, indicating that an internalizing disorder might have a protective effect on young women (Wibbelink et al., 2017). The meta-analysis included 17 independent studies but did not differentiate between types of recidivism. According to some authors, internalizing behavior disorders may have



a protective buffering effect on recidivism because apathy and low energy levels are characteristic of depression and may protect against future risky behavior such as delinquency (e.g., Vermeiren et al., 2002).

Although few studies look at mental health issues in adult desistance, some indications have been found that stable mental health is important in the desistance process of adult women. Huebner et al. (2010), for example, showed that in a sample of 506 incarcerated women, those who were identified as having a stable mental health status were less likely to fail on parole. However, Giordano et al. (2007), who studied 210 incarcerated males and females and followed them over the years, did not find an effect of depression on termination of offending for females but did find an effect for males. However, it was also shown in a study of 352 men and women leaving confinement that incarcerated women with mental health problems are at greater risk for poor re-entry outcomes such as employment, housing, and family support than men (Bakken & Visser, 2018). The role of mental health in desistance is still somewhat unclear, but we may assume that adult mental health problems can cause problems in many different life domains.

### Intimate Relationships and Social Bonds

The relation between social bonds and desistance has received considerable attention, with a growing number of studies examining desistance with different populations in different settings and in different age groups.

#### *Peers/Friends*

Conflicting findings have been reported about the influence of deviant friends (Rodermond et al., 2016). Using data from the Pathway to Desistance Project, Cauffman et al. (2015) found that engaging less with deviant peers in the transition to early adulthood was predictive of desisting trajectories for females with serious offenses. Simons et al. (2002) reported that the presence of deviant friends served to increase the chances of antisocial behavior. In contrast, Gunnison (2001) found that deviant friends had no effect on desistance from crime.

A number of quantitative and qualitative studies in the review of Rodermond et al. (2016) showed that friendships in general contribute to the desistance process of adult females, with qualitative studies adding information about the characteristics of these friendships. Supportive relationships seem to facilitate the process of moving away from crime. Benda (2005), for example, studied a sample of 600 bootcamp graduates (50% females) with an average age of 24 years. He found that next to partner relations, women's friendships reduced recidivism rates and suggested that women primarily seem to find more identity in relationships. Cobbina (2010) interviewed 26 incarcerated and 24 formerly incarcerated females and concluded that support networks were critical to successful reintegration. These support networks also included their supervising officer. "A number of women reported having supervising officers who listened, encouraged, and provided them with support, causing many to view their parole officer as a friend" (Cobbina, 2010, p. 227).

#### *Romantic Relationships*

According to Sampson and Laub's (1993) age-graded theory of informal social control, desistance is mainly the result of social bonds established in adulthood, in particular

marriage and steady employment. Relationship with a partner (defined as marriage, cohabitation, intimate romantic relationship) is also one of the most empirically studied factors that has been found to contribute to desistance from various forms of offending in males. Marriage may not be the most obvious variable to measure partner influence in young adulthood and therefore the influence of a romantic relationship is more often examined in young adult desistance studies. Data from the Pathway to Desistance Project have shown that engaging with romantic partners with an antisocial influence in late adolescence and early adulthood is predictive of persisting trajectories of serious offending in females, while engaging less with antisocial partners is more predictive of desisting trajectories (Cauffman et al., 2015; Monahan et al., 2014). Monahan et al. (2014) showed that females' vulnerability to their partner's antisocial influence across the transition to adulthood was largest when romantic relationships were shorter. Failure to develop long-lasting intimate relationships and engaging in short relationships with antisocial influences may be salient predictors of persistent antisocial behavior in females. On the other hand, females with partners of low antisocial influence showed decreases in antisocial behavior over time, with length of relationship not important. In another longitudinal study with incarcerated female adolescents, Oudekerk et al. (2014) found a relationship between having a non-offending partner and reduced serious offending in early adulthood. Participants were enrolled in two waves of the Gender and Aggression Project (GAP), a longitudinal study of development and functioning among girls confined within a secure juvenile correctional facility. Initial interviews at Time 1 took place in the facility and included 141 girls (mean age 16.7 years). At Time 2, 120 of the initial GAP sample, most of whom had reached early adulthood (mean age 21.7), completed follow-up interviews. Romantic relationship length was significantly associated with violent crime within early adulthood such that the longer women had been romantically involved with their partner the less likely they were to be violently offending. Herrera et al. (2010) also found that longer relationships lead to crime reductions in young adult females.

Simons and Barr (2014) studied the life-course trajectories of 342 African-American women and 241 African-American men using three waves of data (between ages 14–15 and ages 20–22) from the Family and Community Health Study (FACHS). They looked at the influence of cognitive changes and romantic relationships on desistance from crime in young adult males and females. They concluded that the romantic relationship itself was not enough to explain desistance. It was the quality of the relationship (warm, satisfied, happy) that was most strongly related to desistance both for males and for females, supporting the viewpoint of Sampson and Laub (1993). For females, it was also found that partner antisocial behavior increased their criminal involvement, consistent with the idea that both quality of the relationship and partner characteristics are important in the female desistance process. The researchers also found that cognitive changes in criminogenic hostile attributions mediated the relation between romantic relationships and desistance both for males and females. This finding suggests that when the social bond between partners is strong, this relationship will enhance social networks, necessary to facilitate cognitive change which thereafter promotes the desistance process.

The relationship between social bonds and desistance from crime in emerging adulthood was studied qualitatively by Abrams and Tam (2018). They interviewed seven males and seven females who were formerly incarcerated and identified sources of social support that were important in helping the participants to get their life back on track. In contrast



to studies emphasizing the importance of relational bonds for women, the young women in the study of Abrams and Tam (2018) wanted to be more self-reliant and were hesitant to seek help from friends. They were struggling with multiple difficult relationships and did not receive support for their desistance goals from their partners. The lack of trust in other people as experienced by these young women might be related to their history of foster care and a lack of stability in their upbringing.

Concerning the influence of marriage in young adulthood, findings have been mixed. Some quantitative studies have found that marriage is associated with desistance from criminal activity (Broidy & Cauffman, 2006; Forrest, 2007; Gunnison, 2001; King et al., 2007) but others have not (Giordano et al., 2011; Kreager et al., 2010; see also Cauffman et al., 2017). Differences in findings might be explained by uncontrolled difference in the quality of the relationships. Moreover, in recent decades, marital unions have become less common in several countries (Seltzer, 2000). As a result, being married might have a different meaning for those of certain ages in different countries, and, therefore, exert a different impact on desistance. Studies have shown that the negative influence of a (criminal) partner is dependent on the level of happiness in the relationship (Giordano et al., 2007). Based on this finding, being married (to an antisocial partner) could increase, rather than decrease, the likelihood of offending.

Recently, however, Rodermond et al. (2015) showed that being married and the length of the marriage were not related to a lower likelihood of reincarceration. Using a large contemporary sample of formerly incarcerated females released from prison in the Netherlands in 2007, they examined the influence of marriage and parenthood on the risk of reincarceration. Only a full family “package” (being married and having children) contributed to the desistance process. Rodermond et al. (2015) suggested that, rather than parenthood or marriage in isolation, it was the formation of a stable family life, and feelings of self-worth, structure, warmth, and intimacy that likely come with that, that influenced desistance.

### *Children*

Very few studies investigating desistance in the transition to early adulthood include the role of children in the desistance process, likely because people tend to start to build families and have children from early adulthood onwards. In the HHDP study (Rocque et al., 2016) almost no participants were married or had children before the age of 25. Walker and Holtfreter (2016) found that teen pregnancy reduced the odds of delinquent behavior later in life. In contrast, with the Pathway to Desistance Project data, Cauffman et al. (2017) found that, for females who desist from violent crime in early adulthood, impulse control and having a job were the important factors. Having a child was not related to desistance in this high-risk group of young adult females. According to the findings of qualitative studies, the transition to motherhood in early adulthood is associated with reduction in involvement in and even desistance from crime (Gunnison, 2001; Kreager et al., 2010), particularly under the condition that the pregnancy is wanted and for mothers from advantaged families (Giordano et al., 2011).

Although children can be a potential source of stress, which in turn may reduce the likelihood of desistance, the positive effect of having children on desistance in samples of adult women has been reported by, for example, Benda (2005) and Broidy and Cauffman (2006). Broidy and Cauffman studied a prison sample of 424 women, and findings indicated that embracing the role of motherhood hastened desistance. A qualitative study (Giordano et al., 2002) revealed that women often mention their

children as catalyst for change. As noted earlier, Rodermond et al. (2015) found that children only lowered the risk of reincarceration when combined with marriage. A possible explanation of this finding could be the nature of the sample. All women in the sample were serious offenders likely to have problems in a number of different life domains. Having children may not be enough to facilitate desistance from crime, but having both a partner and children (and perhaps financial security and housing) may be sufficient to do so.

## Social Structural Factors

### *Employment*

Research on the work–crime association in emerging adulthood is characterized by mixed results for female offenders. For example, longitudinal analyses based on a Dutch general population sample, which started at age 18–24 and followed more than 600 males and females until age 28–31, showed that, for young women, paid work is not associated with lower levels of delinquency and crime (Wensveen et al., 2017). In this study, delinquency was an overall score based on self-reports, and females had very low delinquency rates. In contrast, Cauffman et al. (2015) studied both male and female trajectories of offending from ages 14–25 years and showed that females who desisted from violent crime were more likely to have a (full-time) job.

Rodermond et al. (2016) showed that studies employing quantitative as well as qualitative methods have reported mixed results, indicating that employment could potentially have a beneficial effect on adult women's desistance but in itself is not enough. Both Benda (2005), using a sample of bootcamp graduates, and Broidy and Cauffman (2006), using a sample of imprisoned women, showed that employment-related factors influence crime cessation. However, Giordano et al. (2011) and Simons and Barr (2014) failed to find an effect of employment. In both studies the average age was 22 years or younger, and it might be that the employment effect is less important in this emerging adulthood period than for older females. A qualitative study of Bui and Morash (2010) with 20 formerly incarcerated females between 25 and 50 years of age showed that for several women gaining employment was related to pathways out of crime.

## Victimization Experiences

Although victimization experiences are not often included in desistance studies with adult females, results show that they might play an important role in hindering the desistance process, especially in young adult females. In a systematic review of the long-term predictors of criminal desistance, Basto-Pereira et al. (2015) looked at predictors of adult desistance from crimes committed as a juvenile. They compared 15 longitudinal studies from seven different countries. Two of these 15 studies were conducted with female samples only (Cernkovich et al., 2008; Colman et al., 2009) and two studies were conducted with male and female samples (Beaver et al., 2008; Trulson et al., 2005). Overall, no strong evidence for adult predictors of desistance for females was found, but both family criminality and a history of sexual abuse seemed to predict persistence in adult female crime. Lanctôt et al. (2007) reported that high-risk female offenders who experienced victimization in the past were more

likely to commit serious offenses later in life than those not experiencing victimization in their youth. Cauffman et al. (2015) found that among females committing serious crimes between the ages 14 and 25, high victimization rates hindered the desistance process and young women who desisted early had fewer victimization experiences.

A summary of the aforementioned results is provided in Figure 9.1, with the caveat that some findings are based on very few studies, and findings are mixed for some factors.

### The Relation between Protective Factors and Desistance from Crime

Protective factors are related not only to the onset of crime but also to desistance from crime (e.g., Lodewijks et al., 2010; Loeber et al., 2007). Discussion of the role of protective factors in reducing recidivism and thus promoting desistance is most prominent in particular in the correctional and forensic domain, where risk assessment and treatment are key elements (Polaschek, 2017; Serin et al., 2016). Protective factors are then seen as promotive or protective or strengths. The identification of strengths is supported by the desistance literature, in which researchers try to understand the mechanisms underlying the individual's transition out of crime (see also Jones et al., 2014). Strengths then refer to factors such as prosocial identity development, cognitive changes, maturation, work, and relationship factors – those factors discussed in the preceding section in relation to female desistance. These factors may be seen as buffering or mitigating risk, leading to the termination of criminal behavior. Within a treatment context, issues of strength-based approaches have been proposed through the Good Lives Model (Ward & Maruna, 2007) and, within the risk assessment domain, protective factors have been put forward as ways of more effectively estimating recidivism risk (de Vries Robbé & Willis, 2017; Nee & Vernham, 2017; Polaschek, 2017; Serin et al., 2016).

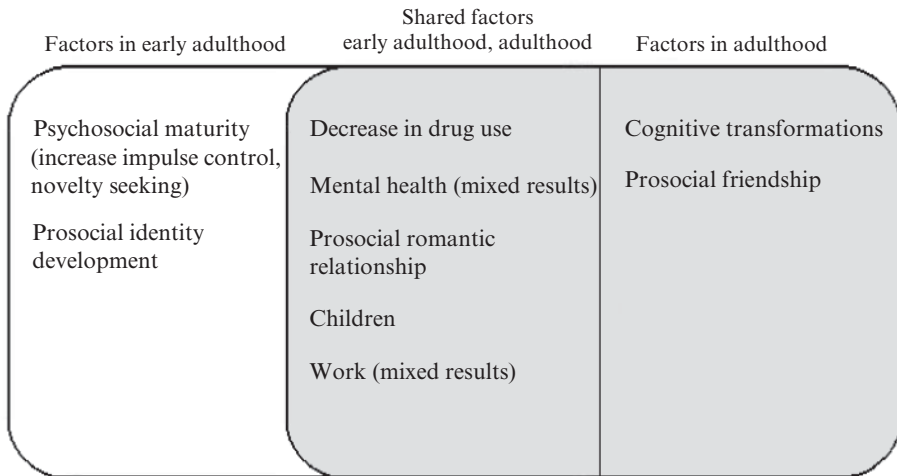


Figure 9.1 Factors related to desistance in early adult and adult females.

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## The Role of Strengths or Desistance Factors in Risk Assessment Tools for Female Offenders

Although the empirical study of strengths and their role in risk assessment is relatively new and there is still a lack of conceptual clarity when referring to protective factors, an increasing number of researchers have developed risk assessment instruments that include protective items and scales (e.g., Polaschek, 2017; Serin et al., 2016). Here, we include only the adult assessment instruments since our review of the female desistance literature revealed mainly reports about desistance of females 18 years and older (even in the studies of desistance during the adolescence–adulthood transition, the women were mostly aged between 18 and 25). Instruments most frequently used for adults (mainly developed for male offenders) that include protective factors are the Structured Assessment of PROtective Factors for violence risk (SAPROF), Dynamic Risk Assessment for Offender Re-entry (DRAOR), Short-Term Assessment of Risk and Treatability (START), and Service Planning Instrument (SPIn). The SAPROF has been developed as a strength-based addition to the assessment of risk for future violent behavior (de Vogel et al., 2009). The START (Webster et al., 2006) is a brief clinical guide for the dynamic assessment of clients' risks, strengths, and treatability related to violent offending. This measure is intended for use with a broad range of adults in correctional, forensic, and civil psychiatric inpatient and community settings. The DRAOR (Serin et al., 2016) is a gender-neutral tool theoretically derived from a review of academic literature on dynamic risk and protective factors, most of it based on male offenders (see Yesberg et al., 2015). The SPIn (see Jones et al., 2015) is a risk assessment tool implemented in correctional service organizations that can be administered to both male and female adult offenders under correctional supervision in community and custodial settings.

The protective factors measured through these instruments are summarized by Serin et al. (2016). In Table 9.1 we included this overview of protective factors from the SAPROF, START, DRAOR, and SPIn, and added the empirical factors found in the female desistance literature.

As shown in Table 9.1, the risk assessment instruments include protective factors in addition to those identified in the female desistance literature in the preceding sections. Although these factors have been studied in different research domains (correctional and forensic versus developmental and life-course criminology), there is notable overlap. As such, for intervention planning purposes, many of the protective factors or strengths associated with female desistance in both young adults and adults are represented in instruments used in clinical practice.

Unfortunately, few empirical investigations of these instruments have included females, and the results reported to date are not yet compelling. Studies evaluating the predictive validity of the SAPROF with females have revealed lower levels for females than for males (de Vries Robbé, 2014; Viljoen et al., 2016). De Vries Robbé, for example, examined in his dissertation the predictive validity of the SAPROF for aggressive incidents during clinical treatment of forensic psychiatric patients. His study included 185 patients (79% male and 21% female) with a mean age of 41. For females only, the motivational scale (including amongst others work, leisure activities, financial management, and motivation for treatment) significantly predicted aggressive incidents during treatment, but not very strongly.

Studies evaluating the predictive validity of the START showed mixed results. The START was used in a study with 102 patients (62 males and 40 females, mean age of

**Table 9.1** Protective factors in the female desistance literature and risk assessment instruments.

<i>Item/variable</i>	<i>SAPROF</i>	<i>START</i>	<i>DRAOR</i>	<i>SPI<sub>n</sub></i>	<i>Overview of female desistance literature</i>
<b>Individual factors</b>					
Intelligence	+				
Empathy	+				
Coping	+	+			
Self-control	+	+		+	+
Motivation for treatment	+	+	+	+	
Positive attitude toward authority/prosocial identity	+	+	+	+	+
Non-hostile attributions				+	
<i>(More) stable mental health (early adulthood and adulthood)</i>					+
<i>Mental health problems (early adulthood)</i>					+
<i>Leaving drug use</i>					+
<b>Relational factors</b>					
Social support/social network	+	+	+	+	+
Emotional support/intimate relationship	+	+		+	+
Secure attachment/satisfaction current intimate relationship	+	+	+	+	+
Attachment to children	+			+	+
<b>Socio-structural factors</b>					
Structured leisure	+			+	
Employment/training/own income	+	+		+	+
Stable accommodation/living circumstance	+	+		+	

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<i>Item/variable</i>	<i>SAPROF</i>	<i>START</i>	<i>DRAOR</i>	<i>SPI<sub>n</sub></i>	<i>Overview of female desistance literature</i>
<b>Other</b>					
Life goals/plans	+		+		
Professional care/ self-care	+	+			
External control	+		+		

DRAOR, Dynamic Risk Assessment for Offender Re-entry; SAPROF, Structured Assessment of PROtective Factors for violence risk; SPI<sub>n</sub>, Service Planning Instrument; START, Short-Term Assessment of Risk and Treatability.

Table adapted from Serin et al. (2016) ( p. 155) (with permission) published by Taylor & Francis Ltd, www.tandfonline.com.

The italicized factors are derived from the female desistance literature.

47) treated in psychiatric hospital for severe mental illness, predicting both violence and verbal aggression (Viljoen et al., 2016). The strength scale of the START appears to have a lower level of predictive validity for females than males, although in the long term it does not appear to have adequate predictive validity for either males or females. However, using both strengths and vulnerability scores resulted in higher predictive validities for all types of aggression, both for males and females (Viljoen et al., 2016). O'Shea and Dickens (2015), however, found that strength items of the START were better predictors for inpatient aggression than vulnerability items, particularly for women. Examination of the strength scale of the DRAOR showed that protective factors were not predictive for female offenders (Yesberg et al., 2015). Yesberg et al. studied 133 men and 133 women who were released on parole after imprisonment. Only the total DRAOR scores predicted recidivism, particularly for women. In a study with the SPI<sub>n</sub>, Jones et al., (2015) showed that high strength scores were more strongly negatively associated with recidivism among high-risk cases than low-risk cases for both male and female offenders. Jones et al. (2015) studied 694 females and 2,962 males serving community sentences. The SPI<sub>n</sub> showed that the strength score offered incremental validity over and above the risk score, both for men and women.

The results of the strength-based risk assessment instruments in predicting recidivism in female offenders can be summarized as follows: (i) mixed results for the use of strength scales in risk assessment, with some indications for the use of motivational strengths and some indications for the effects of using both risks and strengths together; (ii) the risk assessments are mainly conducted in forensic clinical settings, and the results might be different for a broader group of female offenders; and finally, (iii), the instruments used for a broader group of offenders, using less specific strength factors, predicting more general recidivism, seem to perform slightly better for female offenders than the more specific instruments used for more specific offender groups.

## Final Considerations and Recommendations for Next Steps in Research on Assessment and Female Desistance

In this chapter, we reviewed the literature regarding factors that predict desistance from crime for both young adult and adult female offenders. We made a distinction between



the periods of early adulthood (roughly between ages 18 and 25) and adulthood (roughly from age 25 onwards). The factors fall within the domains of psychological and psychosocial desistance theories on the one hand and social processes or sociological desistance theories on the other.

The individual factors, psychosocial maturity and prosocial identity development, appear to be important for desistance during the transition from adolescence to young adulthood, while cognitive transformations and stable mental health were found to be related to desistance in older adult females. The first finding is in line with the maturational hypothesis which states that adolescents become more emotionally stable, knowledgeable, and future-oriented with age. These changes may therefore increase moral reasoning and reduce impulsivity (Lussier et al., 2015). These findings also fit the idea advanced by Loeber et al. (2007) that adolescents move from predominantly external to internal control with behavioral and emotional control becoming more important over time. The importance of cognitive transformations and identity shifts in adulthood, evidenced through the use of documented qualitative methodologies, is more in line with the theories of Giordano et al. (2002), Maruna (2001), and Paternoster and Bushway (2009).

Relational and social-structural factors such as prosocial romantic relationships, children, and work were found to be important in the desistance process of both young adult and adult female offenders and align with social processes and sociological explanations emphasizing access to adult roles such as marriage, parenthood, and employment. These turning points refer to powerful informal social controls that can change routine activities and opportunities for crime. Romantic relationships and work already appear important in female desistance when the transition to young adulthood is taking place and they continue to be important in adulthood in more formalized ways such as marriage and involvement in the full family package of having both partners and children.

It may be that when assessing these strengths or protective factors in clinical practice, the indices of internal control are more relevant for young adult females while more external controls gain significance as females advance in adulthood by embracing adult roles. However, factors leading to desistance very likely will not operate in a vacuum. Many of these factors will likely be interdependent, and effects of one factor may only be understood in the context of other factors. Serious and persistent delinquency is primarily explained by an accumulation of risk factors and a lack of protective factors (Farrington, 2005; Loeber et al., 2006), and desistance from crime may very well be predicted by several interrelated desistance factors (see Rodermond, 2018).

The likely interdependence of different risk and protective factors is also one of the reasons why accurate risk assessment is so difficult, in addition to the ongoing debate about how to use risk assessment instruments most effectively (see, for example, Harte, 2013; Nicholls et al., 2016). This holds for both male and female offenders, but the empirical evidence to support the use of these instruments in applied practice is not substantial, particularly with females.

Findings for other risk assessment instruments as well as the four strength-based instruments suggest that there is great variability in the accuracy of the risk assessment tools predicting violence or recidivism in general with female offenders (e.g., de Vogel et al., 2016; de Vries Robbé, 2014; Geraghty & Woodhams, 2015). Current risk assessment instruments may not contain an optimal set of risk factors for predicting recidivism in female offenders (Jones et al., 2014; Joosen & Slotboom, 2015; Taylor, 2015). One of the few risk assessment instruments especially developed for use with females, the Female Additional Manual (FAM; de Vogel et al., 2012), seems promising but does not include protective factors in its current

version. Further studies to advance the evidence base for such assessment tools are urgently needed. So too are studies that focus on female desistance factors in strength-based treatment approaches, which should also serve to inform theory and applied assessment practices with females who have engaged in delinquency and crime.

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