

AN INTEGRATIVE APPROACH TO SUCCESSFUL DESISTANCE

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Abstract. Desistance not only denotes the cessation or absence of criminal behavior but also includes a continuously decreasing tendency in offence frequency and seriousness, thus enabling experts to study the entire process up to the very point of giving up delinquency altogether. Domestic as well as international literature and the bulk of the relevant studies have been focusing on the underlying causes of criminal activity, overlooking the factors facilitating the abandonment of the criminal career.

However, unlike the former, desistance research is centered on factors that contribute to leaving criminal life behind. Criminological literature distinguishes between two large groups of factors that are at play in the process of desistance, i.e. structural and psychological factors. Taking cognizance of the limitations inherent in unilateral approaches, the vast majority of contemporary researchers endorse an integrative approach since it is obvious that social, environmental, and psychological factors each have their own influence on desistance.

Keywords: desistance from crime, predictors of desistance, integrative approach.

INTRODUCTION

Domestic as well as international literature and the bulk of the relevant studies have been focusing on the underlying causes of criminal activity, overlooking the factors facilitating the abandonment of the criminal career. Taking a historical perspective, criminological investigations were primarily seeking an answer to the question as to why someone becomes a criminal in the first place [1] and then shifted their emphasis to the differences between criminals and non-criminals [2]. Deviating from this practice, desistance research is centered on factors that contribute to leaving criminal life behind. While a number of studies addressing desistance among delinquents have recently become available [2], this latter approach is the least explored and understood in criminology [3, 4].

To date, there has been no consensus among researchers on the concept and definition of desistance [5]. In the literal sense, desistance refers to desisting from something, i.e. giving something up (in our case: a criminal way of life) [6]. In the context of criminology, desistance indicates the ‘end point’ [7]. The concept itself is not a recent one, as Quetelet already mentioned

it in his writing published in 1831.

Some researchers believe that desistance comes into view when an offender gives up their criminal lifestyle altogether [9]. Laub and Sampson [1] stress that a distinction is necessary between “termination” (result) and “desistance” (process). Termination is that point in time when criminal activities come to an end, whereas desistance denotes a process of causation supporting giving up criminal activities.

Literature provides us two major approaches to define the concept of desistance [10]. The first one of them looks on it as a process during which offenders discontinue their criminal activities. This, in fact, makes reference to desistance as a theoretical construct. On the other hand, the second approach considers desistance as the empirical variable of renouncement, a phenomenon observed at behavioral level, a clearly identifiable event that marks the end of criminal activities [11, 12].

Acknowledging the rationale of both approaches, Laub and Sampson [1] draw attention to the distinction between the (moment of) termination of offending (i.e. the end of criminal career) and the process of desistance.

There is a growing tendency in international

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literature to view desistance as a process during which the individual undergoes changes, amends, finds purpose in their life, and demonstrates a socially acceptable normative behavior [13, 2, 14, 15]. In the course of this process, a series of alternating periods of lapse, relapse, and recovery can be observed [16, 2]. Desistance not only denotes the cessation or absence of criminal behavior but also includes a continuously decreasing tendency in offence frequency and seriousness, thus enabling experts to study the entire process up to the very point of giving up delinquency altogether.

THEORETICAL-EXPERIMENTAL APPROACHES

What Marks the Beginning of Desistance?

The process of desistance traces a “zigzag path” during which criminal activity is followed by a transitional period free from criminal offences [17, 18, 19]. One of the major challenges of desistance research is pinpointing the exact moment when a convict’s criminal career is effectively over. As a rule, this does not occur as an abrupt change but in the form of gradual decrease in the frequency, seriousness, and variety of the crimes committed [6].

Some authors argue that if, by their own admission and/or according to criminal records, an individual has desisted from criminal behavior for a period of a year, then we are potentially dealing with a case of desistance [20, 2]. Other authors claim that the process of desistance is already under way once the severity and frequency of offences start to decrease [19], yet still others argue that desistance can only occur when the offender has died [21].

A number of authors distinguish between primary and secondary desistance [22]. The temporary, short-term interruption of the criminal career indicates primary desistance, while a longer-term abstinence from crime, involving changes in the identity is considered to be of the secondary type. Although several studies are

dedicated to the closer inspection of primary desistance [23, 5], there are quite a few researchers pointing out that secondary desistance should be given full attention, as a whole series of temporary interruptions may occur throughout a single criminal career [24].

However, consideration should also be given to the so-termed “false desistance” category, as there are plenty of registered cases when official data indicate the “retired” status of the former offender, whereas in reality we cannot talk about a definitive cessation of offending behavior but rather of a lower frequency and more sophistication in the execution of criminal offences [1].

Next we tried to map the driving forces behind desistance.

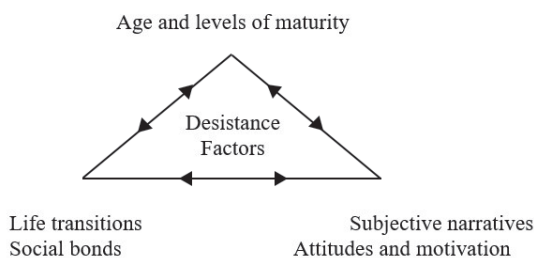
THE PREDICTORS OF DESISTANCE

A position increasingly represented in literature holds that the reasons behind taking up a criminal career are different from the ones underlying desistance (“retiring”) and persistence (staying) [25], a phenomenon that has come to be called asymmetrical causation [26]. Accordingly, the predictors of desistance differ from the factors anticipating entrance into a criminal career, and Szabó [6] attaches a high probability to the existence of other factors at play in the early stages of desistance that are dissimilar from the ones emerging at a later period.

Criminological literature distinguishes between two large groups of factors at play in the process of desistance, i.e. structural (social) and psychological (individual) factors. While for some researchers the functions of social factors constitute the primary target of their investigations, some others give precedence to psychological processes. Research results have demonstrated that both groups of factors under analysis have an impact on the process of desistance.

Studies focusing on social factors found the following aspects to be in correlation with desistance: turning points strengthening social bonds [28]; marriage is of key importance for men in particular [28, 29, 7, 30, 31, 32]; good family relationships [33, 34, 35, 9, 23, 36]; becoming a parent [37, 38, 23, 39]; stable employment [40, 41, 16, 42, 43, 43]; military service [17].

Experts highlighted the following psychological factors in association with desistance: the individual as an active agent [44, 45, 17, 46]; motivation for and determination to change [34, 47, 48, 49, 43]; optimism and hope [49, 50]; recognition of cognitive biases [51];



Source: McNeill & White 2017

Figure 1. Constructing desistance.

identity change [47, 16, 2, 49, 35, 52]; shame [53, 54]; regret [55].

Maruna [56] gives special emphasis to three widespread theoretical approaches to desistance: maturational reform theories, social bonds theories, and narrative theories. The first set of theories places age as the top predictor when it comes to violent acts, murders, and various behavioral disorders [57]. The age-crime curve suggests that the probability of criminal activity within a given population tends to peak in late adolescence and young adulthood, thereafter it follows a pattern of steep decline [58]. Under this view, the impact age has on criminal offences is a natural, direct, and constant one, independent of socioeconomic factors. Researchers, however, call attention to the fact that age alone cannot account for change [21].

Theories of social relationships give prominence to the connection between factors outside the individual and desistance. They highlight the importance of factors such as family, working conditions, or training programs. Life events such as marriage or establishing employment relations are undoubtedly tied in with desistance, even if not as its determinant components. The number and quality of social relations are the decisive aspects in terms of desistance [59].

Advocates of narrative theories claim that people's choices and decisions are influenced by their beliefs and knowledge about themselves, their past and environment [53]. Narratives do not only reveal details about an individual's personality and life story but also determine our choices and behavior.

Taking cognizance of the limitations inherent in unilateral approaches [60], a growing number of researchers have made the case for an integrative approach that gives consideration to both social and psychological factors [51, 52].

The above figure shows that the combination of the factors identified by the representatives of the three theories is conducive to the formation of desistance. Hence, in working with criminal offenders, it is imperative to lay particular emphasis on taking responsibility as an inherent part of maturation, on positive social relationships, and on making reasonable choices and decisions.

LeBel *et al.* [54] distinguished between three groups of models explaining the interactions of social and psychological factors. Theories ranked in the first group consider subjective factors to be of overriding importance as opposed to environmental changes. The second group is made up of strong social models that attach great importance to environmental changes and

turning points, with regard to desistance. Finally, the third group is constituted by subjective-social models proposing that successful social changes in the process of desistance are dependent upon the individual's attitude and mindset. Their research results confirmed the validity of the subjective-social models. Desistance proved to be most successful in the case of individuals with an appropriate social background besides optimism and the motivation for ending their criminal career [6].

The vast majority of contemporary researchers endorse an integrative approach, since it is obvious that social, environmental, and psychological factors each have their own influence on desistance. Next, we will briefly cover a few integrative approaches to desistance.

Bottoms and Shapland's [35] integrative model differentiates seven steps within the process of desistance, all influenced by the individual's "pre-programmed inclinations" and the available social capital. The seven steps are as follows: 1. in response to some stimulus, the individual commits a crime; 2. the need for change appears; 3. the offender begins to think differently about themselves and their environment; 4. takes steps towards desistance; 5. comes up against difficulties and encounters temptations; 6. must look for reinforcing elements in themselves or in their changing social relations in order to maintain the change; 7. in case of a successful change, a new, "non-criminal" identity is developed.

Giordano, Cernokvich, and Rudolph's [13] cognitive transformation theory had cognitive transformation and identity change as its two core elements. The theory proposes the existence of four transformations that are key to the process of desistance. The first one is general openness to change; the second is when the individual seeks out the opportunities that are supportive of change; the third one is prosocial identity; lastly, the fourth one is the perception and evaluation of criminal lifestyle. These transformations act upon and react to each other and the manifested behavior, while emotional maturation also has a crucial part to play in this process.

F.-Dufour, Brassard, and Martel's [19] integrative approach suggests that the process of desistance has its origins in the structure. Structural support is necessary in order for this process to take place. If there is no possibility for offenders to change their lives, desistance cannot occur, since opportunities act as motivational forces pushing them towards taking up a new social identity. Researchers take the view that family members and/or reintegration officers play a

vital part in this process because it falls to them to help the offender recognize the possibilities for change in their environment or redirect their attention to other environmental opportunities.

CONCLUSIONS

Studies committed to investigating criminal phenomena have their primary focus on the main driving forces behind crime and on the differences between criminals and non-criminals. Nevertheless, recent decades have seen the emergence of a growing number of studies aimed at exploring the factors underlying successful desistance. Yet, research findings thus far are still a long way from providing an exhaustive answer to the process under analysis.

Even the very definition of desistance is not a commonly accepted one, given that a part of the researchers consider “retirement” as a clear-cut event, whereas others view it as a process.

Concerning the predictors of desistance, most research aimed to provide a map of either the structural or the psychological factors. The research results obtained revealed that both groups of factors have an impact on the process of desistance, and they cannot be examined in isolation from each other. This realization gave birth to the necessity of integrative approaches, which bring into equal focus these two large sets of factors. The role of interaction between structure and agency is now indisputable in the process of desistance.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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