

## Chapter 10: Diversifying desistance research

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### Abstract

With the proliferation of desistance scholarship in the last two decades, some might argue that a saturation point has been reached. We beg to differ. More diverse research is needed to generate more depth and detailed understandings of desistance. In this chapter, four areas are critically analysed as areas for further development: (1) decolonising and culturally diversifying desistance research; (2) comparative desistance research; (3) diversity and social differences in desistance research (e.g., race and ethnicity, migration, religion, gender, sexuality, class and power); and (4) developing solidarities and social movements in support of desistance. This chapter intentionally features diverse international studies and authors, providing an alternative reading list of desistance scholarship to be celebrated alongside the landmark studies of (already) highly cited authors.

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## **Introduction**

With the proliferation of desistance scholarship in the last two decades, some might argue that a saturation point has been reached. We beg to differ. More diverse research is needed to generate more detailed and wide-ranging understandings of desistance. In this chapter, we pinpoint several areas for further development. We have chosen to highlight diverse international studies and authors in the sections which follow; providing an alternative reading list of desistance scholarship to be celebrated alongside the landmark studies of (already) highly cited authors.

Why critically analyse the state of desistance research and make future recommendations in a collection on rehabilitative work? Because, as demonstrated in various chapters in this collection (McNeill and Graham, Johnson and Maruna, Morris and Graham, this volume), desistance and rehabilitation are relevant to one another in important ways. Improving knowledge of desistance can aid the development of desistance-oriented policies and practices, especially in working with specific groups of people (for example, women, LGBTQ people, migrants and foreign nationals, people who use drugs etc.). It can also help to warn against things done in the name of supporting desistance, however benevolently intended, which may have the capacity to hinder or harm desistance. Even in contexts where desistance and rehabilitation have been invoked as lodestars of criminal justice policymaking and institutional practices, mixed legacies linger.

This chapter builds upon some key analyses of the state of desistance research, theory, policy and practice. Over a decade ago, one of us conceptualised the development of the desistance paradigm (McNeill, 2006) and Lila Kazemian (2007) reviewed extant knowledge at that point, raising a series of theoretical, empirical, methodological and policy considerations for the future. Kazemian's (2007) analysis was apt. However, with the exception of discussing comparative

research, this chapter does not consider the methodological points she raised, as these have been well analysed and addressed by others in the interim. Her analysis tended to focus on developing research and knowledge at the level of the individual, whereas social-structural influences have become considerably more prominent in international desistance literatures since then (see Shapland et al., 2016; Segev, 2018). More than ten years later, following a period of considerable growth in research, reflexive accounts of desistance have also emerged, such as those in Hart and van Ginneken (2017), Shapland and colleagues (2016), and Graham and McNeill (2017). The sections that follow here build on these contributions to champion the need for more diversity in desistance research in several areas.

The final section of this chapter considers solidarities and social movements, and calls for some repositioning and decentring of institutions, policies, sanctions and practices in understandings of desistance. This is *not* to say that the latter don't matter. Rather, it is to contend that desistance should not necessarily be chiefly understood and framed by them. New desistance research increasingly indicates that the forms of social problems, harms and inequalities from which people are trying to move on – which include but are rarely limited to crime – are often intertwined and simultaneous, not separate (Graham, 2016; van Ginneken and Hart, 2017). Over time, forms of penal supervision and experiences of criminal justice, among other State systems and interventions, can blur and become indistinct for those who are more criminalised and institutionalised (see McNeill, 2018). Desistance is not often the language of people in such processes; indeed, some uses of the term may be the self-justifying rhetoric of the criminal justice institutions that ensnares them. Critically and ironically, words like rehabilitation and desistance may be used as a resistance strategy to make sense of processes of leaving behind the harms, losses, criminogenic risks and negative identities produced by *criminalisation, punishment and penal*

*policy*, not just those arising from crime and leaving behind crime (see Armstrong and Lam, 2017; Schinkel, Atkinson and Anderson, 2018). In light of this, seeing people and processes predominantly through the lens of their current sentence is a blinkered view to take if their hope and goal is living in community, independent of sanctions and institutions.

Desistance theories show that an individual's normative development of stopping offending might be the result of processes of aging and maturation, and associated transitions and opportunities (often called 'ontogenic' desistance theories), or of changing social bonds ('sociogenic' desistance theories). Desistance processes may influence and be influenced by a combination of personal and social factors, including people reshaping their sense of themselves and their priorities (identity-related and structuration desistance theories) (for a detailed explanation of desistance theories and synthesised review of international literatures, see Weaver, 2015 and Graham and McNeill, 2017).

Desistance is characterised here as dynamic and developmental, where individual processes are situated in communities and profoundly affected by social structures (McNeill, 2016). Bottoms and Shapland (2011) have noted that neither the dispositions (or 'potential') of individuals, nor their social positions and resources (or 'capital') are static. Rather, they are dynamic and can change over time, producing interaction effects in the broader process of change. In this chapter, understanding and supporting desistance is framed in such a way as to implicate *both* normative personal development *and* political and social-structural change. Desistance *might* sometimes involve working through rehabilitative programmes and interventions in the context of penal institutions, but they may not always be a necessary component of it and they are never sufficient for it (Burke et al., 2018). As we have said elsewhere (McNeill and Graham, this volume), while rehabilitation and desistance processes are not being engineered by a *penal* agent, they are being

supported by social actors, relationships and social-structural contexts – and they can be just as easily undermined by them.

### **1. Decolonising and culturally diversifying desistance research**

A critique of desistance scholarship is that its theoretical formulations and empirical findings have been predominantly derived from studies and scholars in the United Kingdom and United States. This has held true in the past, and it is raised here as an ongoing area for development. Yet, some of what needs to develop is awareness and citation of *existing* desistance research from beyond the UK and US among British and American desistance scholars. Better attention might be paid to contributions to knowledge of continental European desistance research, for example, from the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Norway (see Blokland and Nieuwbeerta, 2005; Bersani et al., 2009; Savolainen, 2009; Carlsson, 2013; Sjøgaard et al., 2015; Lauwaert and Aertsen, 2015; Skardhamar and Savolainen, 2014, 2016; Rodermond et al., 2016; Colman and Vander Laenen, 2012, 2017; Cid and Martí, 2012, 2016; Sivertsson, 2018). In a Norwegian study of the role of employment and desistance with a sample of 783 male offenders, Skardhamar and Savolainen's (2014) findings challenge theorisations of employment as a positive 'turning point' for desistance. Instead, their findings are coherent with maturation theories of desistance, finding that the vast majority of participants desisted prior to employment and becoming employed was not associated with further reductions in crime.

Importantly, there is a need to decolonise desistance research and pay more attention to knowledge and ways of knowing from the Global South, what Carrington (2017) calls 'southern epistemologies' in criminology. This means further efforts to contextualise, nuance and diversify knowledge about desistance, rather than continuing to singularly privilege knowledge and a few

studies and voices from English-speaking ‘Western’ countries like the United Kingdom and United States, as though they have universal and global application. There is much to be learned from desistance research in, for example, Chile (see Villagra, 2015, Droppelmann, 2017), Brazil (Bugnon, 2015) and Mexico (Campbell and Hansen, 2012). In Chile, the longitudinal ‘Trajectories Study’ uses mixed methods and a multi-faceted dataset from a panel of 334 Chilean young offenders to explore persistence and desistance from crime: This study:

... brings new evidence to show that the binary oppositional categories of the completely reformed desister and the categorically antisocial and non-virtuous persister are hardly found, and that individuals can be better identified as half-way desisters/persisters who oscillate between crime and conformity... [Interviewees discuss matters] in a social context in which ambivalence, attachment, consumerism and masculinity emerge as key transversal issues in regards to the desistance process, both as factors that pull individuals away from crime and also push them back towards it (Droppelmann, 2017: 214).

Droppelmann’s (2017) analysis of participants’ emotional attachments to crime and emotional dynamics of desistance is compelling. In explaining a notion she calls ‘crime grief’, she charts how participants express emotion in transitioning, ambivalently, through stages of grieving in leaving crime behind, mourning it as a loss, with some fantasising about a ‘farewell episode’, committing their last crime. This Chilean desistance study serves as just one example of nuanced insights from which those in Anglophone countries in the Global North might learn and further research.

Beyond studies in any one country, positive international collaborations – of which there should be more – include the open access Special Issue on desistance of the *Euro Vista* journal of the Confederation of European Probation. Guest edited by Beth Weaver (2013a, 2013b), this Issue

features a series of articles and life stories written by people with lived experiences of desistance, from different countries. In his autoethnographic contribution about imprisonment, desistance and education, going on to get a PhD in the social sciences, Tietjen (2013: 5) observes how ‘insider’ experiences allow me to shed light on perspectives and issues that many relatively sheltered criminologists may not otherwise recognize.’ Co-producing open access resources and using approaches such as autobiography, autoethnography, stories and narrative criminology are positive examples of diversifying knowledge of desistance across cultural, national and disciplinary borders.

## **2. Comparative desistance research**

In her review, Kazemian (2007) observed the lack of cross-national comparative research on desistance and questioned the generalisability of empirical findings from the United States, for example, to other countries. Recently, comparative desistance research has started to come to the fore, fostering insights across national, cultural and linguistic borders. A few pioneering comparative studies are worth highlighting here.

Linnea Österman (2017) used qualitative feminist methods to research women’s experiences of desistance and penal cultures in Sweden and England. She offers nuanced insights into notions of Nordic exceptionalism and Anglophone excess by considering how participants in both countries face and overcome internal barriers (e.g., mental health, trauma) and external barriers to change (e.g., lack of social housing, liveable income). The most contrasting comparison is that the women’s narratives in Sweden entail examples of being offered ‘ladders’ as infrastructures for change, that is, opportunities and supports to overcome these internal and external barriers,

whereas accounts of such opportunities and supports for change are rare in the women's narratives in England (Österman, 2017).

Dana Segev's (2018) PhD research was a comparative study of desistance in Israel and England, involving a sample of male participants and using a range of mixed methods. In presenting her data and findings, she charts how 'contextual factors structured the pathways out of crime in each country; interacted with identity and agency; and gave rise to variances in the dynamics of desistance' (Segev, 2018: 6). For example, her study comparatively demonstrates how understandings of labels and identities are situated in Israeli and English cultures and societies, illustrating variances in stigmatisation and culturally shaped ideas about what people 'should and should not' be or do.

In a similar vein, Monica Barry (2017) explored cultural influences on similarities and differences in young offenders' perspectives of desistance in Japan and Scotland. The most common similarity was their emphasis on relational factors as a motivation or reason for wanting to leave crime behind. However, the Japanese young people emphasised relational factors in more social or collective terms, whereas Scottish young people emphasised relational factors in more personal and individual terms, to some extent, influenced by cultural and societal factors (Barry, 2017). Comparative studies such as these are currently few and far between; much more comparative desistance research is needed.

### **3. Diversity and social differences in desistance research**

For a body of scholarship which has yielded rich theoretical and empirical knowledge about the influences of identity, social bonds and belonging in desistance processes, it seems somewhat ironic that some identities and social groups are under-researched. To an extent, this may be due

to some identities and groups being minorities in the general population and/or under-represented in criminal justice populations. Historically, a key critique of desistance research has been that some influential studies paid insufficient attention to issues of diversity as they focused on men's experiences of desistance (for an overview of such critiques and ripostes, see Graham and McNeill, 2017). Conversely, in the last decade, there has been significant growth in international research on gendered differences for women and men in desistance processes, including insights on gender, relationships and parenthood (see McIvor et al., 2009; Leverentz, 2014; Carlsson, 2013; Rodermond et al., 2015; Österman, 2017; Bax and Han, 2018). In developing future desistance research agendas, more diversity and social differentiation is needed; in this section, we outline five key areas, of equal importance and in no particular order.

Firstly, building on previous sections, more needs to be understood about race and ethnicity and desistance. The contributions of Calverley (2013), Glynn (2013, and in this volume) and Fader and Traylor (2015) are apt examples of the type of rich insights to be gained in this area. Researching race and ethnicity further implicates some related issues. More needs to be understood about aboriginality and indigeneity, particularly in countries where Indigenous, Aboriginal and First Nation people are disproportionately criminalised and punished, and may have personal and intergenerational experiences of injustice and institutional intervention. In Australia, Marchetti and Daly (2017) illuminate some of the issues involved in their article about Indigenous partner violence, Indigenous sentencing initiatives and desistance, including appreciation of differences in how family relationships and social bonds (and the harms caused to them by violence) are understood and responded to in Indigenous communities. Another cognate area warranting more research is that of migration and integration, including consideration of disproportionate rates at

which foreign nationals are criminalised and punished, for example, in many European countries, including Nordic countries otherwise lauded for their penal exceptionalism (Ugelvik, 2014).

Secondly, while a modest amount of progress has been made in researching the influences of religion and faith-based groups, this mainly relates to Christianity and finding faith and being supported by Christian communities, churches and organisations in desistance processes (see Armstrong, 2014). More research needs to be done among other religions and faith groups in different countries and cultures. How might the influences of religion and faith be understood in instances where religion and faith (or distortions of them) are implicated in offending? Diverse examples might include: terrorism and violent extremism; sectarian crimes; religious hate crimes; religiously-influenced ‘honour’-based violence, abuse or coercive control; civil disobedience; or clergy child sexual abuse within religious organisations.

Third, better understanding is needed of sexuality and gender diversity and the lived experiences of desistance for people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ). Queer criminology offers valuable perspectives to draw upon in developing desistance scholarship (see Ball, Crofts and Dwyer, 2016). Australian criminologists Asquith, Dwyer and Simpson (2017) use queer criminology to offer excellent critical insights to advocate better understanding of criminal careers and desistance processes of young queer people, and the intersectionality and complexity involved. They note how desistance theories have traditionally focused on the importance of parenthood and intimate partner relationships, especially marriage, neglecting the reality that, in many countries, same-sex marriage and adoption rights are not legal and LGBTQ people live with what they call ‘partial social citizenship’ (Asquith et al., 2017: 175). Asquith and colleagues consider the centrality of social bonds and social capital in age and maturation desistance theories, discussing how family ties and peer friendships may be affected by coming

out, in some cases leading to homelessness, social exclusion and employment barriers; problems that can occur in the same age or life stage as criminal offending and desistance processes. Finally, they cogently critique the heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions of what is considered ‘pro-social’ and what is risky in rehabilitative work in criminal justice, calling for more sexuality and gender diverse understandings of *resistance and desistance* strategies in penal contexts. These contributions and the insights of people who are LGBTQ warrant considerable empirical and theoretical exploration.

Fourth, with few exceptions, class and privilege have been neglected in desistance research. How do people in positions of power and privilege leave crime behind? How and why is this similar or different to desistance processes of people who have less power and limited access to opportunities and resources? People who are upper or middle class, with histories of ‘white collar’ crime or involvement in crimes of the powerful, are largely missing in desistance literatures. Ben Hunter’s (2016) research on white collar offenders and desistance from crime is relatively unparalleled in this area to date. Desistance from state crime has been, as far as we aware, entirely un-examined.

Fifth, intersecting issues in health and justice warrant more exploration. Recent research on concurrent processes of desistance and recovery illustrate the importance of this, and why more is needed (see McSweeney, 2014; Graham, 2016, Best et al., 2016; Colman and Vander Laenen, 2017, Kay and Monaghan, 2018). Yet, relative to the hefty amount of existing interdisciplinary research on the drugs-crime nexus, interactions and divergences in recovery and desistance processes are only partially understood. In turn, this may affect the development of more recovery-oriented and desistance-oriented supports. Other intersections of health and justice warranting further exploration include the influences of victimisation and trauma on desistance processes, and the lack of research on victims with convictions, as well as the influences of adversity, grief and

loss on desistance processes. Anderson's (2016, 2019) work on the value of bearing witness to desistance underscores how justice practitioners can be attendant to the humanity, values and experiences of people in such processes. She explains how bearing witness may be as much a response to structural violence and systemically-induced issues, as it is to victimisation, trauma and individual adverse experiences (Anderson, 2016, 2019). Such things are relevant considerations for researchers, albeit in a different role to practitioners.

#### **4. Developing solidarities and social movements**

In this final section, desistance is considered in terms of collectives and collective action, situated in communities. Both Weaver (2013b) and Maruna (2017) conceptualise desistance as a social movement, as accessible, participatory, and civic. Maruna's ideas resonate with the focus of this chapter:

Reframing the understanding of desistance as not just an individual process or journey, but rather a social movement, in this way better highlights the structural obstacles inherent in the desistance process and the macro-social changes necessary to successfully create a 'desistance-informed' future. (Maruna, 2017: 6)

Maruna (2017) considers how the future of desistance might be similar to the solidarities, struggles and achievements of the Civil Rights movement in the United States, the LGBTQ movement in support of same sex marriage in the Republic of Ireland, the 'ban the box' movement to end employment-related discrimination for people with convictions and user advocacy groups, and recovery movements and communities for substance misuse and mental health around the world. Deinstitutionalisation of desistance research is implied in Maruna's (2017: 11) vision of 'desistance as a social movement', contending that the 'next step' is for desistance as a concept to

move ‘from the Ivory Tower to the professional world of probation and prisons, back to the communities where desistance takes place.’

One of the proud strengths of desistance scholarship is the egalitarian sense of whose knowledge is recognised and counted. Desistance scholars commonly argue (or assume) that people with experience of desistance processes and those who support them have important knowledge about the process, and about how to enable and encourage it. This foundational argument or assumption lends itself to developing future research agendas exploring solidarities, collective action, cooperation and social movements. Raewyn Connell’s (2015a: 14) notion that knowledge production can be ‘a radically social process’ is apt. Her calls for ‘solidarity-based epistemology’, rather than hierarchical notions of whose knowledge is privileged, are echoed here (see Connell, 2015a, 2015b) as ways of emboldening more diversity and epistemic emancipation. Engaging and mobilising citizens and communities in supporting desistance as a social movement means being able to communicate about it, in different voices, formats and forums. This means knowledge production ‘with’, not simply ‘for’ or ‘about’ people at the centre of desistance processes and those affected by them. It requires humility and solidarity in the prospect of academic research being repositioned, as only one factor or element, of the bigger picture of what may be achieved through collective action and social movements (Maruna, 2017). It also serves as a reminder that researching and responding to desistance may implicate ‘us’ as scholars, students, practitioners and fellow citizens, but it is not ‘ours.’ Exceptions to this rule are academics and ‘pracademics’ with convictions and their own experiences of desistance (see Weaver and Weaver, 2013; Honeywell, 2013; Hart and Healy, 2018).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have argued that more desistance research needs to be done with people in areas that are of quintessential importance to criminologists, sociologists and psychologists: sexualities and gender; class and power; religion and faith-based groups; health and recovery; race, ethnicity and migration; decolonisation, cross-national and cross-cultural knowledges, and solidarities and social movements. Developing these areas of research will likely necessitate some repositioning and decentring of the hegemony of traditional penal institutions, policies and practices as a dominant framing of research design and understandings of desistance. Clearly, criminal justice policies and practices will continue to need tenacious evaluation and development, or abandonment for better non-penal options – not least to ameliorate some of the known pains of and barriers to desistance (see Nugent and Schinkel, 2016; Halsey et al., 2017). When it comes to understanding and supporting desistance therefore, far from the field being over-saturated, there is much yet to know and do together, to pursue change in the hope of better futures.

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