

Introduction: IJCJ Special Issue on Desistance

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For me, and my own biases in research interests need to be borne in mind, criminological is always at its most interesting when issues pertaining to those people who commit crime are the focal point. Indeed, when we look back at to some of the ‘starting points’ of criminology, both as an empirical subject and as a theoretical endeavour, the reasons why some people start to offend and others do not are there as a key research question. This preoccupation can be traced back to Lombroso’s studies, and is still detectable in terms of theorising and studies today. The focus on why people started to offend really took off, however, during the 1950s and 1960s, with numerous longitudinal studies in the USA and other countries being commenced at various points during those decades. As we now know, and in large part due to those studies, many of the boys and girls recruited into those studies in the 1950s and 1960s, if they had started to offend, were starting to cease offending in the 1980s and 1990s. At that point, the research focus changed subtly but importantly; the attention to processes and theories of onset gave way to thinking about desistance from crime. There were a few papers which touched on this topic published in the 1980s, but the real boost came in the mid-1990s with the publication of Sampson and Laub’s *Crime in the Making* (1993). From that point onwards the focus was on desistance from crime. At one point in the late-1990s I attended the British Society of Criminology’s annual conference. At some sort of reception at that conference, a much older and wiser professor of criminology asked me what I was studying. I told him that I was studying ‘why people stop offending’. ‘What?!?’ he replied, totally aghast at this suggestion. When I repeated what I’d said, he looked at me as if I was mad,

made some small talk for a few moments and wandered off to find someone less crazy to speak to. Shortly after this point, and due to the pioneering work of Sampson and Laub, we see key studies on desistance as a *standalone topic*, legitimate as a topic *outside* of studies of onset and persistence, starting to emerge. I used to keep all of the studies I could find of desistance from crime in a series of box files. To start with, these numbered only a few box files containing maybe 20-30 studies, mainly from the US, and often to be found in obscure journals. (Maybe that much older and wiser criminology professor had a point after all!). I gave up this habit of collating all of the papers I could find on desistance around the early-2000s when keeping on top of the sheer volume of papers in this field started to become impossible. From then onwards, the number of articles, book chapters, edited collections and entire books on desistance mushroomed. Shadd Maruna's *Making Good* (2001) and my own *Rethinking What Works with Offenders* (2002) were two examples of early forays into this field, but these were just the outriders in a whole new subgenre of criminological research, namely desistance studies.

Since the end of the 'side-lining' of studies of why people stopped offending, criminological research has become much more attuned to the diversity of experience in terms of all aspects of our studies. Studies of desistance have been no different in this respect. The original focal point of many studies of desistance were on those people who 'produced' what we may now call 'volume crime'. Hence pioneering studies of desistance talked only of 'desistance', rather than 'desistance by sex offenders' ... 'by females' ... 'by white collar offenders' ... 'by ethnic group' ... 'by former-prison inmates' ... 'by former gang-members' and so on. At first, this might be seen as further evidence that academics are fond of finding out 'more and more about less and less' (in other words, a search for the precise causal processes for everything to the *n*th degree). But this would be to ignore that there is no 'one size fits all' when it comes to explaining social phenomena. Studies of everything which a social scientist would wish to study need to recognise (if not immediately incorporate into their research design and theorising) variations by gender, by age, by ethnicity, by geographic location, or by historical period. That there are now studies of desistance from crime which are attuned to issues of gender, ethnicity, offence type and country/criminal

justice system makes our evidence stronger, even if this comes at a cost of appearing to be more fragmented at times.

This collection grew out of a series of online and face to face seminars funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council, as part of their International Networking Grants programme.¹ Three papers are presented herein. In the first, Trent Bax of Ewha Women's University, Seoul, South Korea further reports on his exploration of the lives and life-courses of 35 former methamphetamine users in New Zealand and their physical, mental and spiritual health. In keeping with many other studies, Bax finds that many ceased using these drugs without formal or professional support from treatment services. One aspect of desistance studies which has received increasing attention relates to what might be thought of as different phases of desistance. In an article in 2002, Maruna and Farrall suggested that desistance might have a primary element (where simply not offending was common), and a secondary element (at which point identities and roles might become disrupted and the individual ceasing to offend starts to recognise and adapt to this change). This motivated McNeill (2016) to propose that there was then a third phase of desistance (in which changes in the desisting individual's sense of belonging were encountered). In their paper, the second in this collection, Fergus McNeill and Marguerite Schinkel seek to elaborate this concept (referred to widely as tertiary - or relational – desistance) and in so doing set an agenda for further research on this concept. Also building on the original ideas of Maruna and Farrall (2002), is the third and final paper in this collection. Emily Gray and Stephen Farrall, using data from a cohort study born in 1970 and followed up into their early-40s (in 2012) explore is there is phase which might be thought of as 'quaternary desistance' – the point at which those formerly engaged in offending are objectively and subjectively similar to those who never offended. The evidence is intriguing.

What this collection shows, I hope, is that there is still much to be learnt

1 *Economic and Social Research Council*, "Social Policy Support For Families in the UK and South Korea: To What Extent Does Family Support Create Inclusive Growth and Social Cohesion?", ES/W010712/1, (Dr Sung-Hee Lee, PI, Sun-Hee Baek, Seoul Theological University Social Welfare, Mrs Bak-Ne IM, Chung-Ang University, Alexander Nunn University of Derby, Dr J. Yoon Irons, University of Derby, and Stephen Farrall). February 2022 – July 2023.

about why people cease offending. Studies of desistance have not, at least not widely, delved into the topics which Bax does in his studies of former methamphetamine users and suggest to us new avenues to pursue. The papers focusing on tertiary and quaternary desistance suggest that the desistance ‘journey’ may be broken down into smaller elements, even if the precise staging of these remains unclear. Certainly, we have come a long way since the first steps into charting desistance were taken in the 1950s and 1960s ... it would appear that there is still much more to learn and appreciate.

References

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