Chapter 3

Travelling hopefully: desistance theory and probation practice

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Introduction

This chapter aims to explore the impact of desistance theory and research on probation practice to date and to examine underdeveloped aspects of this important interface. We aim first to review the few empirical studies that have specifically focused on the role that probation may play in supporting desistance and also wider debates about the implications of desistance research for probation and social work practice. By seeking to explore and understand the processes through which people come to cease offending – with or without intervention by criminal justice agencies – desistance research potentially provides a wealth of knowledge for policy and practice, and directs those involved in criminal justice practice towards a series of issues that have been, until recently, somewhat neglected in the pursuit of 'evidence-based' practice. These issues include the significance of officer–offender relationships in the process of rehabilitation (Burnett and McNeill 2005), and the significance of the social contexts of offending and desistance (Farrall 2002; McCulloch 2005; McNeill and Whyte 2007). Though these are important issues, this chapter seeks to move beyond them by exploring other crucial but underdeveloped dialogues between desistance research and probation practice around questions of identity and diversity.

Desistance theories

While there is no agreed theoretical or operational definition of desistance, most criminologists have associated desistance with *both* ceasing *and* refraining from offending. Rather than being a linear progression to the state of non-offending, however, the process of desistance has been likened to a zigzag path (Glaser 1964) and to a drifting in and out of offending (Matza 1964). Maruna and Farrall (2004) have suggested a key distinction, which we discuss in some detail below: primary and secondary desistance. Primary desistance refers to any lull or crime-free gap in the course of a criminal career. Secondary desistance is defined as the movement from the behaviour of non-offending to the assumption of a role or identity of a non-offender or 'changed person' (Maruna and Farrall 2004). Though the usefulness of this analogy has been contested (Bottoms *et al*. 2004), it does seem likely that where policies and practices are concerned with re-offenders who have acquired criminal or criminalised identities the concept of secondary desistance may be particularly useful (McNeill 2006).

In reviewing explanations of desistance, Maruna (2000) identifies three broad theoretical perspectives in the desistance literature, relating to age and maturational reform, life transitions and the social bonds associated with them, and narrative changes in personal and social identity. Increasingly, desistance theorists tend to try to draw these three strands together. For example, Farrall and Bowling (1999) draw on life course criminology (particularly Sampson and Laub 1993) and structuration theory (Giddens 1984; Bottoms and Wiles 1992) to propose a developmental theory of desistance. They argue that the process of desistance is 'one that is produced through an *interplay* between individual choices, and a range of wider social forces, institutional and societal practices which are beyond the control of the individual' (Farrall and Bowling 1992: 261, emphasis in original).

Some desistance theorists have increasingly focused on which changes at the level of personal cognition (Giordano *et al*. 2002) or self-identity and self-concept (Burnett 1992; Graham and Bowling 1995; Maruna 1997; Shover 1996) might precede or coincide with changes in social bonds (LeBel *et al*. 2008). Using the data set from the Oxford Recidivism Study (Burnett 1992), followed up after a decade, LeBel *et al*. (2008) attempted to disentangle the interaction between such 'subjective/agency' factors and 'social/environmental' factors. They found that subjective states measured before release had a direct effect on recidivism as well as indirect effects through their impact on social circumstances experienced post release.

Similarly, drawing on a symbolic interactionist perspective, Uggen *et al*. (2004) emphasised both the role of age-graded social bonds and the social-psychological processes underpinning these related role transitions.

In addition to changes linked to employment and family, they stress the significance of 'civic reintegration'. Building on Maruna's (2001: 7) contention that desistance requires that ex-offenders 'develop a coherent pro-social identity for themselves', and his recognition of the salience of involvement in 'generative activities' as critical to this process, they specify the varieties of civic participation that contribute to such an identity and their associated subjective meanings for desisters. They show how role transitions across socio-economic, familial and civic domains relate to identity shifts over the life course. However, Uggen *et al*. (2004: 260) also emphasise the reduced citizenship status and the enduring stigma experienced by offenders, resulting in 'the reduced *rights* and *capacities* of ex-offenders to attain full citizenship' (emphasis in original). These status deficits undermine commitment to conformity and create new obstacles to desistance and the assumption of pro-social roles. Even where ex-offenders articulate a desire to assume such pro-social roles, they 'often lack the resources and social relationships necessary to establish role commitments and solidify new identities' (Uggen *et al*. 2006: 284–5). These obstacles represent a major problem because of the important role of societal reaction in supporting (or undermining) new self-conceptions and the reinforcement of pro-social identities (Maruna and Farrall 2004); Meisenhelder (1977: 329) described this as the 'certification' stage of desistance.

Supporting desistance

The role that probation or social work may play in supporting desistance has been examined in very few empirical studies. One of the first such studies was located in New Zealand and based on extensive interviews with a randomly selected sample of 48 people who had been placed on probation in 1987 and had not been reconvicted by 1990 (Leibrich 1993). Few people spontaneously cited probation as a factor in their desistance and only half of the sample considered probation to have been useful in this regard. A revision of personal values, reassessing what is important, responding to new family commitments, desire for a better future and the development of self-respect were cited as reasons for wishing to desist, as well as fear of consequences and shame. Desistance was accomplished by tackling personal problems using interpersonal resources, accompanied by a sense of life management; this last finding might be linked to the discovery of agency to which later authors allude (see Maruna 2001; McNeill 2006).

In Leibrich's study, the quality of the supervisory relationship was cited as pivotal in supporting the process of desistance. The desisters and their probation officers shared similar views about the characteristics they deemed crucial to such relationships: having someone that they could get on with and respect, who treated them as individuals, was genuinely

caring, was clear about what was expected of them and trusted them when the occasion called for it (Leibrich 1993, 1994). Negative appraisals of the supervisory relationship were attributed to a sense of being merely 'processed'; the probation officer having been late or missing appointments; and where the officer gave the impression of being curious rather than genuinely concerned. The desisters, like the probation officers, emphasised the need to identify and address causes of offending and emphasised the individuals' own motivation as an essential component of the change process (see also Farrall 2002; Maruna *et al*. 2004a).

In a study of 'assisted desistance' in England, Rex (1999) explored the experiences of 60 probationers. Most of the probationers considered probation to have assisted the process of their desistance from offending. Rex found that those who attributed changes in their behaviour to supervision described it as active and participatory. Their commitments to desist appeared to be generated by the personal and professional commitment shown by their probation officers, whose reasonableness, fairness and encouragement seemed to engender a sense of personal loyalty and accountability. Probationers interpreted advice about their behaviours and underlying problems as evidence of concern for them as people, and 'were motivated by what they saw as a display of interest in their well-being' (Rex 1999: 375). Such evidence resonates not just with Leibrich's earlier findings, but with other arguments about the pivotal role that relationships play in effective interventions (see for example, Barry 2000; Burnett 2004; Burnett and McNeill 2005; Holt 2000; Hopkinson and Rex 2003; McNeill *et al*. 2005; McNeill 2006).

Farrall (2002) explored the progress, or lack of progress, towards desistance achieved by a group of 199 probationers in England. Though over half of the sample evidenced progress towards desistance, Farrall found that desistance could be attributed to specific interventions by the probation officer in only a few cases, although assistance in identifying employment opportunities and mending damaged family relationships appeared particularly important. Paradoxically, it was in these very areas that practitioners were found to be wary of intervening. The findings indicate that in terms of the identification and resolution of 'obstacles to desistance' only a minority of probationers and practitioners worked in partnership; there was limited evidence of agreement between probationers and their supervisors about the obstacles to desistance and how best to overcome them. Overcoming obstacles was perceived by both probationers and practitioners to be contingent on a range of factors often beyond the control of either practitioner or probationer; unsurprisingly therefore, no specific method of probation intervention could be credited with successfully overcoming obstacles. Rather, desistance seemed to relate more clearly to the probationers' motivations and to the social and personal contexts in which various obstacles to desistance were addressed. Farrall (2002) goes on to argue that interventions must pay

greater heed to the community, social and personal contexts in which they are situated. Necessarily, this requires that interventions be focused not solely on the individual person and his or her perceived 'deficits'. Vitally, it is social capital (see below) that is necessary to encourage desistance. It is not enough to build capacities for change where change depends on opportunities to exercise capacities.

Building on these insights, McCulloch's (2005) study, based on 12 semi-structured interviews with probationers and their probation officers in Scotland, drew on probationer and practitioner perspectives to explore the attention given to probationers' social contexts in supporting desistance from crime. Somewhat in contrast to Farrall (2002), McCulloch found that probationers and practitioners had little difficulty in reconciling the apparently polarised objectives of welfare support and offence-focused interventions; although, akin to Farrall (2002), she found that direct work in the area of employment was limited and that 'talking methods' were the most frequently cited approach to addressing social problems (see also Rex 1999). Where obstacles to desistance were successfully resolved, participants attributed this both to probation intervention and the wider normative processes that occurred in the probationer's life. McCulloch forwards a convincing argument for an increased level of probation involvement in families and local communities, and a greater focus on integration (see also Farrall 2002; Rex 1999, 2001).

Looking beyond these empirical studies of probation and desistance, other authors have analysed the implications for practice emerging from the broader desistance research. Maruna *et al*. (2006), reflecting on the findings of the Liverpool Desistance Study, emphasise the significance of the use of language in professional discourses and interactions with offenders. They suggest that discourses should be future-oriented, and that a focus on risks and needs should be balanced with an emphasis on the individual's strengths. Such a 'strengths-based' (Maruna and LeBel 2003), prospective focus for practice would perhaps point towards the use of 'solution-focused' approaches, which capitalise on strengths, resilience and protective factors (see McNeill *et al*. 2005). Furthermore, broader changes in narrative identities might be facilitated by 'narrative approaches', which aim to support the process of identity reconstruction (Parton and O'Byrne 2000; Gorman *et al*. 2006). Maruna *et al*. (2004a) suggest that the promotion of participation in generative activities, which serve to bolster and assist in sustaining desistance through a process of pro-social socialisation and identity change, might be assisted through increasing opportunities for participation in voluntary service or other opportunities to make a positive contribution to local communities. However, as McNeill and Maruna (2007: 236) observe, generativity is a two-way process and ex-offenders' efforts to contribute should be reciprocated by communities and society through recognition of those efforts and reinforcement of them. This would suggest the need, therefore, to

build communities that are desistance supportive, acting 'as partners in the process of sponsoring, supporting and sustaining rehabilitation' (McNeill and Maruna 2007: 237).

Debates about generativity are linked to those around 'social capital', a term that essentially refers to the resources that reside in social networks and relationships (Field 2008). Bonding social capital denotes ties between similar people in similar situations, such as immediate family, close friends and neighbours. Though this type of social capital can tend towards reinforcing exclusive identities within relatively homogeneous groups (including criminal groups), the significance of probation officers engaging with families to assist in the strengthening, regeneration or development of new family ties has been repeatedly stated throughout the desistance literature (see Farrall 2002; McNeill and Whyte 2007; Rex 1999). Bridging social capital, on the other hand, refers to more distant ties with similarly situated persons: for example, ties that typify loose friendships with work colleagues. Bridging social capital could be developed through participation in generative activities and employment, which provide opportunities to form new relationships. This type of social capital is more inclusive and tends to generate broader identities and wider reciprocities rather than reinforcing a narrowly defined group; as such it is essential to social mobility and self-progression. Building ex-offenders' bridging social capital, as McNeill and Whyte (2007) explain, requires engaging with and reassuring community groups, communities and employers, supporting them in working with ex-offenders. As such, it might suggest a case for re-examining the salience of community learning and development practice for probation work.

New possibilities for creative practice

So far, the contents of this chapter may have been familiar, at least to those who have followed the emergence of debates about desistance theory and probation practice. In the remainder of the chapter, however, we want to engage with this book's aspirations around encouraging 'creative practice', by examining what some of the more recent developments in desistance theory and research might contribute to such practice. Our specific focus will be on issues of identity and diversity, how they impact on the experience of desistance and how creative practice might constructively engage with the opportunities and challenges they raise.

Identity, desistance and creative practice

The role and significance of identity change in desistance is contested. Bottoms *et al*. (2004), outlining the initial theoretical reflections

underpinning their Sheffield Pathways Out of Crime Study (SPooCS), challenged Maruna and Farrall's (2004) emphasis on the notion of secondary desistance, questioning the extent to which identity change or cognitive transformation is a *necessary* part of explanations of desistance. They argue that to 'adopt this approach seems to suggest that if someone has experienced no strong role or identity change, but just stops offending for a significant period, he or she is not a ''true'' desister' (Bottoms *et al*. 2004: 371). Bottoms *et al*. later suggest that for desistance to occur in a given person's life a reduction of criminal opportunities might be the product of deliberate choice, but it might also be the accidental by-product of, for example, new employment, or a meaningful relationship. While the authors acknowledge that the process of desistance is probably the result of an interaction between social context and subjectivities or agentic factors, they question the extent to which the agent is necessarily conscious of this change as it occurs. By contrast, in Maruna and Farrall's formulation, desisters *are* aware that they are changing and indeed positively wish to change: 'Secondary desistance involves . . . a measurable, reflective and more *self-conscious* break with patterns of offending' (Maruna and Farrall 2004: 8, emphasis in original). Bottoms *et al*. (2004) query whether, although people clearly realise that they have changed when they *have* desisted, they are actually consciously aware of this change *as it occurs.*

Differences around the role of agency in these narratives may depend in part on whether they are elicited prospectively or retrospectively. Retrospective accounts of desistance may be susceptible to cognitive rationalisations that place undue or unrealistic emphasis on the role of agency (see also Farrall and Bowling 1999; Sampson *et al*. 2006). Bottoms *et al*. (2004) suggest the possibility of 'a gradual injection of greater self-responsibilisation . . . allowing oneself to stop and think about what one is doing, particularly within a social context where supportive others are indicating that this is a desirable development' (Bottoms *et al*. 2004: 376). This 'gradual injection' could also be conceived as a feature of the *transition* from primary desistance to secondary desistance or of the process of movement along the continuum from primary to secondary desistance. Indeed, findings from the SPooCS study,[1] a prospective longitudinal desistance study of 113 persistent young male adult offenders in their early twenties, emphasise both the precariousness of and the sense of struggle involved in desistance; findings resonant with Burnett's (1992) observation that, when studied prospectively, desistance appears faltering, uncertain and punctuated by relapse. Most of the sample did not completely desist from offending although there was definite evidence that the average frequency of offending had significantly reduced. Interestingly, the qualitative data from this study stressed the significance of the onset of adulthood and the realisation that the advent of new roles might require a change of lifestyle.

Table 3.1 Three models of desistance processes

Giordano et al. *(2002)*	*Vaughan (2007)*	*SPooCS (ongoing)*
1 General cognitive openness to change	1 Discernment: review of possible lifestyle choices	1 Current offending is influenced by a triggering event
2 Exposure to 'hooks for change'	2 Deliberation: review of pros and cons of various options (a comparison of possible selves	2 The decision to try to change
3 Availability of an appealing conventional self	3 Dedication: commitment to a new non-criminal identity	3 The offender thinks differently about himself
4 Reassessment of attitudes to deviant behaviour		4 The offender to take action towards desistance
		5 Maintenance: the offender looks for reinforcers but may encounter obstacles

Others have tried to delineate or model processes of desistance (see Table 3.1). In conceptualising the first stages of desistance, Giordano *et al*. (2002) discuss the significance of 'openness to change', while Vaughan (2007: 393) posits an initial stage of 'discernment' where one 'reviews possible choices and puts them beside our multiple, persisting concerns around which one has hitherto structured a life dominated by crime'. Here Vaughan suggests that 'a pre-requisite for change, then, is that the agent is at least willing to consider different options' (2007: 394). Probation staff might more readily identify this as the 'contemplation' stage of Prochaska and DiClemente's 'cycle of change' (Prochaska *et al*. 1992).

The SPooCS authors suggest a five-stage model of the desistance process: current offending is influenced by a triggering event; which leads to the decision to try to change; which leads the offender to think differently about himself; which leads the offender to take action towards desistance; which requires maintenance – the offender looks for reinforcers but may encounter obstacles. Findings from SPooCS confirmed that new and strengthening social bonds appeared to be linked to successful desistance, but with the desire to change being critical and central to this. Indeed, this would appear to mirror Giordano *et al*.'s (2002) suggested second stage in their theory of cognitive transformation, which the authors view as central to the process of desistance, namely 'exposure to a particular hook or set of hooks for change' (2002: 1000) and 'one's attitude toward [it]' (2002: 1001). Additionally, the SPooCS team discovered that empathy seemed to increase over time, manifesting in the

need to take into account others' feelings, a sensitivity that the authors consider as an emerging feature in moving towards desistance. Again, this process is reflected in what Vaughan (2007) terms 'the second stage of *deliberation*'. 'What gets accomplished here is a review of the pros and cons of potential courses of action and a comparison with sticking in a well worn groove of custom. What ultimately emerges is a comparison of selves – who one is and who one wishes to be' (Vaughan 2007: 394); or, as Giordano *et al*. (2002: 1001) put it, the envisioning of 'an appealing and conventional replacement self'. Vaughan (2007) emphasises that there is an influential emotional component to this comparative process which involves thinking about the reactions and feelings of others and envisaging how one's current self or identity is perceived by others.

In similar vein, Maruna and Farrall (2004: 27–8) explain that:

> a lull can turn into secondary desistance when two things happen. First, the person finds a source of agency and communion in non-criminal activities. They find some sort of 'calling' – be it parenthood, painting, coaching, chess or what Sennett (2003) calls 'craft-love'[2] – through which they find meaning and purpose outside of crime . . . The second part of our desistance formula, like that of Lemert's deviance theory, involves societal reaction. The desisting person's change in behavior is sometimes recognised by others and reflected back to him in a 'delabeling process'. (Trice and Roman 1970)

The authors of the SPooCS study, in discussing their five-stage model, suggest that failure to maintain desistance in the face of obstacles may lead to relapse and a return to the beginning of the cycle (as similarly implied by Burnett 1992).[3] Healy and O'Donnell (2008), citing Vaughan (2007), propose that:

> even when offenders have nominally dedicated themselves to a new non-criminal identity, they may still experience setbacks as they negotiate their way from a criminal lifestyle with its associated benefits and demands to a completely new way of being. In the chaotic, uncertain times of primary desistance, their long-term goals may become temporarily sidelined. (Healy and O'Donnell 2008: 35)

In secondary desistance, however, crime not only stops, but 'existing roles become disrupted' and a 'reorganisation based upon a new role or roles will occur' (Lemert 1951: 76); 'desistance does involve identifiable and measurable changes at the level of personal identity or the ''me'' of the individual' (Maruna *et al*. 2004b: 274). The SPooCS authors themselves ultimately concede that successful maintenance and reinforcement in the face of obstacles may result in the adoption of a crime-free identity as a

non-offender. It is in this secondary desistance phase that Vaughan's (2007) tertiary and final stage of 'dedication' might be positioned. He argues that to establish desistance, agents must regard their commitment to their new identity as incompatible with ongoing criminality and regard criminality as 'morally incompatible with whom they wish to be' (Vaughan 2007: 394). Indeed, the individual experiences at this juncture the fourth stage in Giordano *et al*.'s (2002: 1002) four-part theory of cognitive transformation: 'a transformation in the way the actor views the deviant behaviour or lifestyle itself'.

Healy and O'Donnell's (2008) Irish study lends further weight to the foregoing arguments. The authors studied Irish male probationers who were in an early stage of the change process and who were comparable in age with the SPooCS sample. They found that while their narratives contained a high level of motivation and modest goal aspirations in relation to the acquisition of employment or in reference to relationships, they contained little evidence of agency or generative concerns consistent with notions of secondary desistance. Healy and O'Donnell propose that their findings therefore support the view that, at least in the early stages of change, while ex-offenders do not necessarily possess a strong sense of agency, the development of social bonds may be intermediate goals that indirectly lead to desistance. The authors suggest these goals in turn forge new commitments, which then perhaps invoke a sense of an agentic self, result in a new identity and a focus on a different and possibly more altruistic set of goals.

Developing our understanding of this highly nuanced process of change is critical to both the appropriate targeting and the focus of probation (and wider criminal justice) interventions. As research contributes more to our grasp of the complexities of the sequencing of desistance processes, so probation interventions need to become rooted in much more careful assessments of where people are in the process, and what specific measures of support and encouragement may be appropriate at this moment in the unfolding but fragile process. To borrow a navigational analogy, unless and until we can locate our position on a map, we cannot plan our route. Similarly interventions that fail to locate the offender properly in the desistance process will be at best misconceived and at worst damaging. The challenge for creative practitioners, therefore, is to find new ways and means of engaging offenders and of working with them to identify where they are in relation to the desistance journey, as well as how to move forward.

But, extending the analogy, it is not enough to locate the offender in the change process; it is also necessary to locate the process in its social and cultural context. To fail to do so is to try to guide or support the journey with no awareness of the terrain through which it travels. Yet, to date, much of the literature on desistance has focused on the dynamics of desistance in relation to white men. Indeed the relationship between class,

culture, ethnicity, gender, religion, spirituality and desistance has received notably limited attention. We turn now to examine the extant literature addressing some of these areas and to considering the implications.

Gender, desistance and creative practice

Despite its focus on white men, desistance research has paid surprisingly little attention to questions of masculinities. Gadd and Farrall (2004: 128) argue:

> For critical gender theorists, men's symbolic and material dependence on the nuclear family is heavily implicated in the self-same social relationships and structures that routinely reproduce patterns of male delinquency and sexual inequalities more generally (Connell 1995: ch. 5). However, this point has largely escaped the attentions of those exploring desistance from crime.

They observe that the literature, while underlining the significance of work and family life, neglects to consider 'the gendered nature of men's places within these spheres, and is hence often devoid of an analysis of power, wider social consequences and the complexity of meaning that social and personal relationships have for the people in question' (Gadd and Farrall 2004: 131). Gadd and Farrall illustrate how the structure of meanings on which men draw are embedded in a wider network of social discourses that are themselves structured by gender, race and class; in this context, individuals invest in those discursive positions that assist them to make sense of their experience. They suggest that to understand men's involvement in crime and desistance, attention needs to be paid to how men's anxieties and fears are shaped by social discourses and by contradictory and conflicting social expectations about what it is to be a 'man'. This would suggest a need for creative practice with men to attempt to explore men's specific subjective experiences of their masculinities; to explore social discourses and expectations about what it is to be a man and how these manifest in relations between men, and in relations between men and women; and to put forward alternative ways of accomplishing masculinity and identity (Gelsthorpe and McIvor 2007).

The significance of gendered social expectations emerged in a Scottish study of youthful offending (McIvor *et al*. 2000) which explored desistance among three groups of young people aged 14–15, 18–19 and 22–25 (see also Jamieson *et al*. 1999). They conducted interviews with a total of 75 'desisters' (43 male and 32 female) and 109 young people (59 male and 50 female) who were still offending or had done so recently. In the youngest group, desistance for both boys and girls was associated with the real or potential consequences of offending and with the growing recognition that

offending was pointless or wrong. Young people in the middle age group similarly related their changing behaviour to increasing maturity, often linked to the transition to adulthood and related events like securing a job or place at college or university, or entering into a relationship with a partner or leaving home. For the oldest group, 'desistance was encouraged the assumption of family responsibilities, especially among young women, or by a conscious lifestyle change' (McIvor *et al*. 2000: 9). In general, the young women tended to attribute their decisions to desist to the assumption of parental responsibilities, whereas the young men focused on personal choice and agency. Among persisters, girls and young women were more often keen to be seen as desisters, perhaps reflecting societal disapproval of female offending. McIvor *et al*. (2000: 9) speculate that:

> Assigning the offending to the past rather than acknowledging it as a current or future reality may enable young women to better cope with the tensions that may arise when, on the one hand, society encourages gender equality and, on the other, continues to double condemn young women who step beyond their traditional gender roles.

Graham and Bowling's (1995) earlier study of young people aged 14–25 found similar gender differences. They noted a clear association between the transition from adolescence to adulthood and desistance from offending among young women. Young men, in contrast, were less likely to achieve independence and those that did leave home, formed partnerships and had children were no more likely to desist than those that did not. Graham and Bowling (1995: 65) speculate that life transitions 'only provide opportunities for change to occur; its realisation is mediated by individual contingencies. Males may be less inclined to grasp, or be able to take advantage of such opportunities, as females.' More recent studies have revised this conclusion to some extent, suggesting that similar processes of change do indeed occur for (some) males but that they seem to take longer to 'kick-in'; positive effects of the assumption of responsibilities in and through intimate relationships and employment are more notable in men aged 25 and over (Flood-Page *et al*. 2000; Farrall and Bowling 1999; Uggen and Kruttschnitt 1988). Thus, it seems that young men take longer to grasp the opportunities for change that these life transitions provide.

Interestingly, Giordano *et al*. (2002: 1052) suggest that despite the commonalities between males and females in their accounts of their change processes, women were more likely than men to cite 'religious conversions' and parenthood as catalysts for change. This is broadly compatible with Rumgay's (2004) theorisation of women's processes of desistance as rooted in the recognition of an opportunity to claim an

alternative, desired and socially approved personal identity. Certain common identities, she suggests, such as that of a mother, may provide a 'script' by which to enact a conventional pro-social role, serving to enhance the individual's confidence in their ability to enact it successfully. This success in turn positively affects the woman's sense of self-efficacy and, alongside the deployment of other skills and strategies, assists in perpetuating the newly acquired identity (see also Maruna and Roy 2007; Giordano *et al*. 2007).

Essentially, there would appear to be some consensus that women's desistance is related to what may be broadly construed as investment in relational commitments, manifesting in generative concerns and the assumption of responsibility (Barry 2007). These include marriage, familial and parental responsibilities, awareness of peer, familial and societal disapproval, commitment to religious beliefs, concerns surrounding the consequences of continued offending and threat of consequent punishment and desistance from substance abuse (see Jamieson *et al*. 1999; McIvor 2007; Barry 2007).

Taken together, this evidence would appear to suggest the need for creative practice that supports women's efforts to change through the provision of services which take account of the realities of their lives, of what is important to them and of the social demands placed upon them (see Gelsthorpe and McIvor 2007; McIvor 2007); practices that provide practical and emotional support to them in meeting those responsibilities and commitments that are significant to them. This might include addressing, for example, housing and financial problems, assistance with childcare, access to meaningful education and employment opportunities, and support to strengthen social and familial support networks. Creative practice would be focused on empowering women to take control of their lives by being able to access opportunities not only to increase their capacity to accumulate (social) capital, but to expend capital. Barry (2007) identified this as critical to the desistance process for women, in terms of generative concerns (such as ensuring their children's welfare, making restitution to their local community) and the assumption of responsibility (such as employment or familial responsibilities). But equally creative practice must avoid inappropriately universalised or stereotypical assumptions about women's relational commitments, generative concerns or socially valorised desires to assume caring responsibilities. Other pathways to desistance need to be opened up and supported for women who chose other ways to realise their femininities.

Ethnicity, desistance and creative practice

While gender has been a neglected area, research on the relationships between ethnicity, 'race' and desistance has been even more limited to

date. Some relevant studies have been conducted in the United States (Elliot 1994; Rand 1987; Hughes 1997, 1998). Elliot (1994), for example, studied offenders between ages 24 and 30 and found that white offenders desisted earlier than black offenders. Elliot speculated that contextual differences, for example in a person's workplace or living environments, might explain this phenomenon. Pager's (2003) research, conducted in Milwaukee, found that people from minority ethnic communities may face additional barriers to desistance from offending. Pager found that ex-offenders were only one-half to one-third as likely as non-offenders to be considered for employment, confirming that a criminal record presented a major barrier to obtaining employment. Furthermore, and of particular significance, Pager found that African-American ex-offenders were less than half as likely to be considered by employers than their white counterparts, and that African-American *non-offenders* fell behind even white ex-offenders. Thus, additional obstacles faced by minority ethnic offenders as a result of racism seem likely to hinder and frustrate their processes of desistance.

Bracken *et al*. (2009) examined the interplay between structural constraints and individual choice in the desistance pathways of male Canadian aboriginal gang members, with particular consideration given to their economic and social marginalisation, over-representation in the criminal justice system, and to issues of culture, history and identity. Their study underlines the significance both of increasing social capital as a mechanism for overcoming structural constraints and of reacquisition of and reconnection to a culture that can be seen as a mediating force between structure and agency. They conclude that for these young males successful desistance involves more than a decision to cease engagement in criminality and access to education or employment opportunities. It requires supporting individuals to comprehend and internally reconcile their experiences of social injustice and trauma and to assist them to reconnect with their aboriginal identities, traditions and culture.

In the UK, there is evidence that black and minority ethnic people (and particularly those of African or Caribbean origin) are over-represented in British prison populations, and indeed in the criminal justice system more broadly, compounding the disadvantage that they encounter economically, educationally and in terms of employment (Calverley *et al*. 2004, 2006; Sharp *et al*. 2006). Calverley's (2009) important exploratory qualitative investigation examined the various dynamics underpinning the process of desistance for 33 male offenders of Indian, Bangladeshi, and black and dual heritage ethnic origin resident in London. Calverley identified distinct variations in the pathways to desistance between the three groups, particularly at the level of family and community. For the Indian participants, desistance was influenced by their families' 'aspirational values' and greater access to economic, employment and educational resources, while the Bangladeshi participants' families showed a

willingness to offer acceptance and forgiveness connected to strongly held religious values. Returning to religious roots and building an identity through renewed religiosity represented a viable strategy for these men. Calverley argues that for men in both of these ethnic groups, desistance was typically a more collective experience involving their families *actively* intervening, constructively and supportively, in their lives; in turn their desistance involved an expectation that they would follow particular norms of behaviour and adopt the same beliefs and values system as their families. In contrast, black and dual heritage participants experienced a much more individualised and isolated process of change. For them desistance seemed to necessitate their disengagement from previous social relationships, developing a structured lifestyle and independently initiating steps towards 'self-improvement'. This suggests the existence of what Calverley, citing Deane *et al*. (2007), refers to as different 'cultures of desistance' among different ethnic groups (Calverley 2009: 302). While desistance for all three groups seemed to require the adoption of different lifestyles, he found that the social context inhabited by black and dual heritage desisters was more problematic and more likely to hamper desistance, compared with experiences of Indian and Bangladeshi participants.

In general terms, Calverley found that the factors correlated with desistance reflected those identified elsewhere in the desistance literature: access to social capital, engagement in social institutions, the significance of social bonds to family and employment. These factors were identified as impacting the desistance process across all three groups. While he found that ethnicity in itself neither caused nor impeded desistance, his findings emphasise that ethnicity indexes significant structural differences which have implications for the operation of processes of desistance in terms of 'the availability of resources, opportunities and pathways out of crime, which in turn affect the expectations and actions of desisters themselves' (Calverley 2009: 308). Thus, while the three ethnic groups 'shared the same fundamental mechanisms responsible for promoting desistance, the socio-structural and socio-cultural differences between them affected how, when and where these mechanisms operated' (Calverley 2009: 219). Again, this underlines the significance of attending to both the socio-structural location and the cultural contexts within which desistance takes places.

Calverley's study evidences how desistance from crime is not solely a within-and-between individual phenomenon, but is also dependent on interactions between the individual and their immediate environment, community and social structure. This reinforces the need for creative practices that attend and adapt to the social and cultural contexts that offenders and their families inhabit and work to maximise the potential contribution of individual and community resources to supporting desistance and reintegration. Clearly, though, within the inevitable

constraints of these social structures, it remains necessary to respect and support the individual's right to determine both how they define their ethnic and cultural identity and to what extent they wish to engage with family and community in their process of change. Practice approaches need to remain sensitive to the heterogeneity both across and within ethnicities, cultures and ethnic and cultural identities.

Religion, spirituality and creative practice

Sharp *et al.*'s analysis (2006) of the resettlement needs of black and minority ethnic offenders identified gaps in the types of support that they were more inclined to seek and to which they were more inclined to respond. They also reported that a number of service providers highlighted the significance of religion for many black and minority ethnic offenders, both in the emphasis on religion evident in their upbringing and as a feature of their familial and cultural traditions. Within prisons some black and minority offenders identified that certain needs were not being met due to security constraints or resource restrictions. Often this related to dietary requirements and accessing time and space to attend to religious practices.

Marranci[4] spent four years investigating the impact of imprisonment on Muslim identity and the effect of imprisonment on prisoners' experiences of Islam, from a sample of approximately 175 Muslim former and current prisoners across Scotland, England and Wales (Marranci 2009 forthcoming; also 2007). Marranci demonstrated that Muslim ex-prisoners encountered particular issues distinct from the non-Muslim population, yet there was little evidence of considered strategic approaches to addressing their particular resettlement needs. Muslim ex-prisoners received less support than non-Muslims in terms of accommodation and less assistance reintegrating into the community. For many current and former Muslim prisoners, in particular for those involved in alcohol or drug use,[5] their ostracism from their community and sometimes their own families served to increase the isolation they experienced (Marranci 2008); ex-prisoners often found themselves rejected from mosques due to fears surrounding allegations of extremism (Marranci 2007). Given the significance of social bonds and social ties to desistance, such experiences may present additional obstacles to desistance. Where familial support was available, Marranci explained that prison visits presented further difficulties. Muslim women were discouraged from attending prisons due not least to different cultural forms of attire and the desire to avoid drawing unwarranted attention to themselves, which had implications for the maintenance of significant relationships during periods of incarceration (Marranci 2008).

Marranci's study also illustrates how, for a number of interrelated reasons, Muslims often rediscover Islam within prison (Marranci 2007).

Among those reasons is the desire to repent and to make good, presenting (in Giordano *et al*.'s (2002) term), a 'hook for change' as they 'reconsider their life and link their experience of prison not to human punishment but to an opportunity granted by Allah to change their life' (Marranci 2007: 8). Marranci (2006) elucidates a theory of identity as encompassing two functions – it allows human beings to make sense of their autobiographical self and it allows them to express that self through symbols that communicate feelings that could not otherwise be externally communicated (see also Marranci 2007). Marranci (2007: 8) proceeds to differentiate between Islam as 'an act of identity' and Islam 'as an act of faith'. He argues that Muslims in prison often see Islam more as an act of identity than of faith:

> The act of identity is used to re-establish equilibrium within the autobiographical self and the surrounding environment. Prisoners in general, because of the prison environment and the small community in which they live, develop a strong viewpoint . . . some of them tend to develop an essentialist view of Islam based on radical dualism: Islamic versus non-Islamic. (Marranci 2007: 8)

This is heightened where Muslim prisoners suffer greater security surveillance than other inmates; he found that such intrusions were particularly directed at those who adopted religious symbols or cultural objects or exhibited a strong commitment to religious rituals and practices, at least where this was interpreted by prison authorities as evidence of radicalisation (Marranci 2007). He explains that security policies within prisons, including restricting praying in a communal space (see also Sharp *et al*. 2006) or reading the Qur'an during work breaks, effectively exacerbate rather than suppress radicalisation insofar as such attitudes, underpinned by a misrepresentative conflation of Islam with terrorism in the mass media, serves to increase the isolation and feelings of persecution experienced by Muslim prisoners. The combined effects of their experiences of incarceration, criminal justice processes and associated ostracism can lead towards disenfranchisement and anger towards a state that they perceive as oppressive and discriminatory. This experience can leave Muslim ex-prisoners vulnerable to recidivism and, for a minority, radicalisation.

Nonetheless, drawing on the findings of Bracken *et al*. (2009) and Calverley (2009), we might infer that the rediscovery of Islam has the potential to assist Muslim offenders to reconnect with their religious identities, traditions and culture so as to support their efforts to change. As Marranci (2007) suggests, this depends to an extent on the willingness of mosques, Islamic institutes and the wider Muslim community to offer support to former offenders. Of course, Islamophobic attitudes in the wider community also need to be challenged. Services need to recognise

and engage with the multiplicity of communities in society, to pursue meaningful and sustained engagement with those communities and to recognise the important role of religious institutions as a resource within communities.

Maruna *et al*.'s analysis (2006) of the life story interviews of 75 male prisoners provides an insight into the dynamics of conversion to Christianity within prison that resonates with some aspects of Marranci's study. The authors argue that the prison environment, within which one is removed from all that is familiar and typically stripped of one's identity, is precisely the type of environment in which self-identity is likely to be called into question. As such, prisoners are 'particularly open to new ways of perceiving themselves and organising their lives' (Maruna *et al*. 2006: 163). Maruna *et al*. (2006: 161) suggest that conversion enables the prisoner to create:

> a new social identity to replace the label of criminal, [it] imbues the experience of imprisonment with purpose and meaning, [it] empowers the largely powerless prisoner by turning him into an agent of God, [it] provides the prisoner with a language and a framework for forgiveness and allows a sense of control over an unknown future.

For Maruna *et al*.'s respondents, their experiences of prison led them to consider:

> fundamental questions about life, death, meaning and the individual's place in the world. Not only did they seek a framework through which to interpret and attribute meaning to events they had experienced, they also sought one that would provide answers to their questions and give them ways to move forward and construct a new, positive life and self-identity. (Maruna *et al*. 2006: 173)

Thus, like Marranci, Maruna *et al*. (2006) conceptualise conversion as a process of reinterpretation of one's autobiographical self, in some respects a change process analogous to the identity transformations underpinning the process of desistance more generally. However, perhaps the unique contribution that the commitment to a form of religion may offer is a 'cognitive blueprint for how one is to proceed as a changed individual' (Giordano *et al*. 2007: 4); a blueprint found in the prescriptions and teachings associated with that faith, upon which the individual can draw as they embark on the process of desistance and encounter new situations and experiences. To return to the navigational analogy, religion provides a sort of map to identity transformation.

Giordano *et al*.'s longitudinal study (2007) allowed the authors to identify variations in ex-offenders' life circumstances that assisted them to specify the particular conditions under which commitment to religion was

positively associated with desistance or otherwise. Their analysis highlighted the importance of differentiating between respondents who describe a generally positive orientation towards religion and those who make a specific cognitive connection such that they regard their attachment to religion as incompatible with involvement in criminality, resonant of Giordano *et al*.'s fourth stage in their theory of cognitive transformation (2002, discussed above). As we have outlined previously, and as the authors demonstrate, the presence of a pro-social bond in and of itself does not appear to be sufficient to trigger or sustain desistance; rather it is the strength, quality and meaning that the social bond has for the individual (Giordano *et al*. 2007). Thus a deep and intense connection to religion may be essential if it is to exert sufficient influence to sustain the individual through the difficult process of change and if it is to facilitate identity or cognitive self-transformation associated with secondary desistance.

Indeed, in their analysis of the narratives of respondents who exhibited such a deep personal connection to Christianity, Giordano *et al*. (2007) observed a shared emphasis on the role of positive emotional changes that their attachment to Christianity heralded. Christianity was considered to inject life with meaning, to provide a source of emotional capital and thus a key resource upon which to draw in the face of stressful circumstances. Respondents not only referred to important inner personal changes in their feelings towards themselves but also to changes in their stance, attitudes or feelings towards the external world. For some respondents, their new-found commitment to religion enabled the development of different forms of social capital in terms of the consolidation or reparation of existing relationships, particularly where such relationships reinforced or affirmed their religious commitments, and the development of new relationships and social networks through affiliation to religious institutions or faith groups (see also Chu 2007 in terms of desistance from drug use).

However, Giordano *et al*. (2007) highlight that while some people may be favourably disposed towards religion, unless the associated ideologies, ideas and practices resonate with the individual, it is unlikely to act as a catalyst for change. In addition, even where a strong attachment to religion pertains, ex-offenders are often disadvantaged on multiple levels, and have social networks that are similarly disadvantaged, and they may encounter an array of what they experience as insurmountable obstacles that may overwhelm the individual and overshadow the positive effects that commitment to religion may provide, perhaps hastening a return to more familiar coping strategies, which may include substance use or a return to criminality.

Just as creative practice requires practitioners to engage with how individuals construct their identities, masculinities, femininities and ethnicities, so it requires practitioners to open up lines of enquiry and

resources for desistance that may reside in religiosity and/or spirituality. The evidence above suggests that this is about both identity transformations and the development of social networks that may support them. Just as with the other aspects of identity discussed above, this is not merely a matter of the individual's subjective experience of these aspects of identity; it is as much about the social, structural and cultural conditions that conspire to make these aspects of our identities assets or liabilities in the desistance process.

Conclusion

We noted at the outset of this chapter that desistance research has already had a significant impact on debates about probation policy and practice, and that two of the key messages arising from this developing dialogue related to the reassertion of the significance of relationships (both personal and working relationships) in the change process, and the reassertion of the significance of the social context of that process. The research findings that we have reviewed in this chapter serve to strengthen these arguments, but they add new dimensions of complexity to debates about how to integrate the insights of desistance research into approaches to offender rehabilitation. None of the research that we have reviewed overturns the central and general messages of desistance research; the desistance process seems to have common elements for all or at least most people – developing maturity, the emergence of new social ties that hold particular subjective significance for the individuals concerned and, sometimes, a renegotiation of personal identity.

However, when we look more closely at the evidence around gender differences, ethnic differences and the significance of religion, we find clear evidence that the common elements of the process can be very differently experienced and constituted, depending on the socio-structural, cultural and spiritual positions that people occupy and move through as they negotiate their personal and social lives. The central practical implication of this insight – which may be obvious but which we think needed to be evidenced – is that no rehabilitative intervention that aims to support desistance can expect to succeed if it lacks sufficient sensitivity to these diversity issues. To revisit again the navigational analogy that we used in thinking about where a person might be situated in the temporal process of desistance, you simply can't help someone get to where they want to go if you don't understand where they are now. Understanding where they started, how far and how fast they have come, grasping the significance of the terrain through which they have travelled and on which they now stand, as well as the nature of the terrain and the likely pleasures and pains of the journey ahead – all of these are essential aspects of being an effective guide.

But to extend the analogy still further, if creative practice is to be critical practice, it needs to include but also extend beyond supporting the individual's journey through a seemingly determined and fixed terrain. Creative practice needs to be about more than navigating the way over, under, around or through obstacles – sometimes it needs to be about confronting and removing them. Thus, while it involves a constructivist approach that respects and engages positively and respectfully with the development of personal narratives, it also requires a commitment to challenge forms of oppression that devalue certain identities while overvaluing others. To focus solely on overcoming these obstacles at the individual level runs the risk of accepting the world as it is, thus colluding with the social structures and attitudes that diminish the resources for desistance available to marginalised groups. It is here that for practice to be truly creative it must be destructive.

We are acutely aware that this chapter has said much more about theory and research than it has about practice, and that those few suggestions we have made about creative practice have been abstract and generalised at best. To some extent, this is a product of our own trajectories and positions as academic researchers, perhaps no longer best placed to engage with such questions, but it also reflects a principled resistance to the temptation to simply prescribe practice approaches on the basis of desistance (or indeed any) research. Perhaps one of the lessons we can learn from the history of 'what works' in probation is that we should see research not as dictating practice but as a resource for practice; in the context of desistance research, a resource that challenges practitioners by elaborating our understanding of the processes it exists to support (McNeill 2009) – and our specific aspiration here has been to provide a chapter that functions more as a resource on which creative practitioners can draw than as a statement of what creative practice may be. Answering that question depends on the kind of dialogue that this book exists to stimulate.

Notes

1 www.scopic.ac.uk/StudiesSPooCS.html

2 Maruna and Farrall (2004: 28) explain that 'much criminal behaviour is maintained by rewards that are extrinsic (status, riches) or fleeting (the buzz of a drug). The discovery of an alternative, intrinsic rewarding pursuit can be a necessary, but not sufficient component of the successful abstinence from such highs'. The authors offer the example from Sennett (2003) who referred to his own cello playing in his adolescence as an example of 'craft love', describing the manner in which this activity provided him with a pleasure in itself, for itself and a sense of self-worth that wasn't dependent on anyone or anything external.

3 For many this will again evoke images of Prochaska and DiClemente's cycles of change (Prochaska *et al*. 1994).
4 Marranci's findings will be published in his forthcoming book *Faith, Ideology and Fear: Muslim Identities within and Beyond Prisons* (Continuum).
5 Many Muslim prisoners denied any difficulties they were experiencing with substance misuse for fear of rejection, which presented an additional barrier to accessing the relevant support services.

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