

Desistance frameworks[☆]

Kathryn J. Fox

University of Vermont, Department of Sociology, USA

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ABSTRACT

Ward and Durrant (2021) explain the need for practice theories, to tie together the abstract, explanatory features of criminological theories, and operationalization of interventions. In this paper, the theory/theories of “desistance” (i.e., the cessation of criminal activity) are examined with an eye toward describing the various frameworks that explain and predict desistance from crime, and their implicit models for desistance-promotion. The paper makes three fundamental points: 1) that there are multiple explanations for desistance, ranging from external, stabilizing influences to internal identity shifts (and their interaction); 2) because of this, desistance is more an observable process that is predictable under some conditions, but does not represent an overarching theory for behavior or change. Finally, since theories of desistance are not rehabilitation models per se, the article develops elements of practice frameworks, or steps toward creating interventions, that are suggested by the explanatory features of the different approaches to desistance in practice.

Ward and Durrant (2021) propose a mid-range level of theory (or framework) in criminology to serve as a conduit between etiological assertions and intervention activities. In other words, the shortcoming, as they see it, is that there are conceptually based assumptions built into/behind treatment modalities (i.e., interventions), but the problems are two-fold: first, that the general claims in most theories do not create a clear path for what to target for intervention, or how to target “it.” Secondly, they argue, that most interventions are based loosely on some notions contained in the explanatory theory, but the targets and activities do not necessarily correspond logically to the mechanics implied by the theoretical principles. In trying to create a map for practice frameworks for desistance theory, we must begin with an examination of desistance as an explanatory theory.

Desistance is regarded as a theory, although it is arguably not; I would assert that it is a cluster of theories or perhaps even empirical observations. Early desistance theories focused on moments in time (e.g., marriage) that fostered some pause or end to criminal offending (Copp et al., 2020; Farrington, 1986; Giordano et al., 2003; Laub & Sampson, 1993, 2001; Laub et al., 1998; Mears et al., 2013; Moffitt, 2006; Nagin et al., 1995; Sampson & Laub, 2005). Later, theories became more interested in the process of desistance and the internal transformation in identity that desisting from crime was both a contributor to and an effect of (Chouhy et al., 2020; Farrall, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2011; Farrall & Calverley, 2006; Giordano et al., 2007; Healy,

2013, 2017; Kay, 2020; Maruna, 2001; Ward & Maruna, 2007). There are many explanatory theories that interrogate how people manage to desist from crime. Desistance from crime is a *state of being*—the state of not engaging in criminal activity for an extended period of time.¹ Any explanation is rooted in a particular understanding of what causes criminal *persistence*—the task is to interrupt the cycle. Contrasting desistance to rehabilitation—the latter concentrates on, particularly in the Risk-Needs-Responsivity (RNR) literature (Andrews & Bonta, 2006), what contributes to reoffending behavior, in other words, the how and why of recidivism. In focusing on why and how people stop criminal offending, observing, measuring, and understanding desistance processes is a distinct project from rehabilitation.

Explanations about what contributes to the desistant state of being include life-course explanations, (i.e., that people age out of criminal behavior or move into a different phase of adult life), to the removal of external reentry barriers (i.e., employment or housing), to social-psychological factors, such as the creation of non-criminal narratives about the self, or optimism for the future (Maruna, 2001). For example, Theobald et al. (2019) found that marriage is a strong contributor to desistance. As marriage is often part of a process as people move through the life-course, what effects may seem to be “aging out” may in fact be a function of marriage. However, Theobald and Farrington (2010) discovered that marriage has different effects on re-offending depending upon age, for example, those who marry later engage in more illicit drug

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E-mail address: kfox@uvm.edu.

¹ The length of time one must cease criminal activity to be considered desistant is subject to debate (See Kirk, 2012).

use. Thus, the mitigating impact of marriage is not straightforward or uncomplicated. In articulating a set of practice guidelines to accompany this theoretical and empirical observation, one might consider that promoting marriage is a sound intervention to reduce criminal offending. Is marriage part of rehabilitation then? This example highlights the difficulty in formulating a desistance-based practice framework due to the complex interaction of causal factors and confounding variables (See also [Bottoms et al., 2004](#); [Bushway & Paternoster, 2014](#); [Copp et al., 2020](#); [Farrall et al., 2010](#); [Farrington, 1986](#); [Gendreau et al., 1996](#); [Giordano et al., 2007](#); [Giordano et al., 2003](#); [Giordano et al., 2002](#); [Nagin et al., 1995](#); [Sampson et al., 2006](#)).

The explanations for desistance are many and varied. Just as there are innumerable theories and descriptions of contributors to criminal activity and identity, there are countless ways of understanding the basis for desistance from crime, and the implications of such understandings. In this paper, we will examine the challenges of creating and processes needed to create a practice theory from the explanatory theories of desistance. To begin, though, it is essential to recognize the variety of theoretical underpinnings in desistance models, which makes its status as a theory (with a capital T) questionable. Moreover, the many variables associated with desistance suggest a few distinct ways of imagining the nature of desistance as either ontogenetic (meaning, internal developmental process) or sociogenetic (meaning, social phenomenon) ([Warr, 1998](#)); where the process(es) of desistance, most importantly, whether the process is facilitated by external or internal mechanisms (See [Fox, 2015](#)); and to what extent the state of desistance is attributable to agency or structure or both ([Farrall, 2004, 2005](#); [Healy, 2013](#)). These debates are not trivial; for our purposes, the difference—or how we conceptualize the mechanism(s) for desistance—have implications for how we develop any practice theory to operationalize interventions.

The figure below demonstrates the epistemic work needed to create practice guidelines from basic explanatory theories.

Desistance Drivers	Core values/Principles	Knowledge related assumptions	Intervention guidelines
External (marriage, employment, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stability leads to desistance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adult conventional attachments will lead to desistance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employment counseling, skill training
Internal (pro-social identity)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cognitive shifts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pro-social narrative options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationship counseling
External/internal interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> External opportunities create (narrative) desistance identity opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social support Social capital formation generativity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Motivational interviewing, strengths-based approaches to reentry Circle of pro-social support upon reentry/ resettlement

The constellation of theories has a unifying premise: “that people can change” ([Farrall, 2011](#); [Farrall et al., 2010](#); [Farrall & Calverley, 2006](#); [Maruna, 2017](#), p. 6). [Ward et al. \(2014\)](#) refer to desistance as a “social normative” model insofar as:

“...desistance processes and interventions are underpinned by the values of social cooperation and harmony.” (p. 40).

In other words, desistance is a social process rather than a strictly individual one; the models that describe desistance as emanating from a cognitive or narrative change view the change happening in a social context. External factors prompt social-psychological processes in conjunction with others as well.

There are barriers to change, or facts that make change harder or easier, but justice-involved individuals can and do change ([Andrews & Bonta, 2006](#)). This notion is the essence of any rehabilitation framework. Desistance, as a theoretical frame, assumes there are certain barriers to change, even if they are unalterable aspects like youthful status. Constructing a practice framework may benefit from having: a) the means for desistance be specified; b) the mechanism be targeted for intervention. Complicating the extant literature is the fact that there are data to support a life course explanation, a labeling explanation, a cognitive transformation explanation, and more. Many (even most?) youthful offenders just need to mature. Those whose criminal persistence is an outgrowth of a formal labeling process may need a de-labeling event to

help them embrace a nondeviant identity, or a prompt to restructure their script. In fact, the cognitive neutralizations that persisters and desisters utilize differ, and both indicate and serve as predictors of narrative shifts ([Maruna, 2004a](#)). Attention need be paid to the enduring question regarding how individual people change; what encourages change and what prohibits it?

1. Rehabilitation and desistance

Since around the 1970s–80s, psychological approaches have been dominant in correctional programming, specifically cognition and attitudes. Focusing on “fixing” offenders assumes an individual pathology without respect for the social, contextual, and structural barriers that exist upon release (and in pathways to prison) and exist outside of psychology, personality, or cognition (See [Fox, 2014](#)). Since the 2000s, research and intervention have begun to incorporate more sociological logics, including attention to removing barriers and supporting those released from prison ([Fox, 2012, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017](#); [Seiter & Kadela, 2003](#)). For example, systemic or structural barriers, such as access to decent, legal employment, would be pursued for change at the systems level. An example might be a government subsidy to employers willing to hire those released from prison. A staff person could be dedicated to assisting with resume-writing, how to reveal criminal histories to employers, interview skills, etc. Job training could also help the individual with skill-building and employability. All of these types of practice-based interventions would address low employment, if framed as a systems-based barrier to desistance.

The prevailing paradigm in forensic psychology is the risk-needs-responsivity (RNR) principle ([Bonta & Andrews, 2017](#)). Most treatments in criminal justice settings address specific identified risk/need factors (dynamic ones such as substance abuse) and targeting such behaviors with interventions to lower substance abuse or otherwise impact

the particular dynamic risk factor. This framework also embraces the idea that people can change, with proper risk assessment and appropriate risk-need-targeted interventions. Aside from these premises, there is the assertion in the model that interventions should be dosed according to risk levels and intensity of need and matched to the subject's learning style or needs. The supposition of the RNR may be that people can change, but the theory behind the change is a general personality/cognitive theory that crime is more likely predictable with certain antisocial traits, and pro-criminal modeling and support. Dynamic risk factors can be changed, for example, education, or employment. Static risk factors are statistically predictive, but cannot be changed, such as the age at which someone started committing criminal acts. Intervention, therefore, is based on treating these deficits, such as using cognitive approaches to understand how to be less impulsive, for example. Or if an issue is poor employment history, perhaps working on work relationships and commitments to mitigate this particular risk factor.

This discussion of RNR is meant to demonstrate that there are many theories that assume change is possible. As such, then, desistance must have more at its core than this assertion. Whereas rehabilitation efforts or models tend to focus on the acquisition of particular (lacking) skills, whether cognitive or other, desistance models attend to promoting social integration upon reentry, by enhancing factors known to correlate with success. Desistance is not a rehabilitation framework, although

they share some core principles (Ward et al., 2014). If we are to draw a line from the explanatory theory or assumptions to the resultant interventions that flow from the theory, we must first assess the fundamental values inherent in a theory. Within the UK's official treatise on effective probation, it lists "assisted desistance" as fundamental to the process.² Included in its list of principles is: "respect individuality," "build positive relationships," "recognize the significance of social context," and "recognize and develop people's strengths." There is an understanding embedded within the principles that social context might include employment needs or some other risk marker. But the overwhelming focus is on the individual within social circumstances, and the role of social relationships in addressing their needs.

Another subtext of the core principles is that being involved in crime is an undesirable outcome and state of being, one that has social causes. In addition, helping people achieve a better status is important, but in particular ways, as the UK probation service endorses: working "with" people rather than "on" them. Such a framing implies that justice-involved people are deserving of and capable of sharing the same moral space as law-abiders, and that societal change and engineering would change the conditions to enable sharing moral space, thereby promote desistance (Chouhy et al., 2020; Fox, 2012, 2015; Ward & Maruna, 2007). In fact, as Shapland and Bottoms (2011) discovered, those in the desistance process share many of the same values and morals as conformists do. As such, the barriers to a law-abiding life are the target of intervention in theorizing desistance.

As opposed to other models presented in this issue, such as the Good Lives Model (GLM), desistance as a theory (or theories) is not a treatment modality, nor was it conceived as a better way to do intervention into problematic behavior. GLM was created in situ within the context of treatment for sexual offending (Ward, 2002; Ward & Mann, 2004). Therefore, creating a bridge between its theoretical premises and the mechanics of treatment supports its reason for being. Insofar as GLM precepts are incorporated into an assisted desistance process, then some of the practice guidance from its treatment modality can be entertained. Nonetheless, desistance is a process observed empirically, explained theoretically, and tested analytically to answer a set of research questions (e.g., "what factors promote or enable cessation from crime?").

2. Desistance theories

Ward and Durrant (2021) argue that there has been, until now, a disconnect between etiological theories and treatment theories. They posit that embedded within any theory is a set of values and consequent/co-occurring normative principles. The accompanying body of relevant knowledge contains a set of assumptions about the nature of whatever is under consideration (in this case, assumptions about why people desist and when and how). Guidelines for intervention or practice stem from these assumptions and values. In many or most cases, the link between these aspects of theory and practice remains indistinct and undefined.

Ward (2019) also explains elsewhere the important role of theory in correctional treatment. Etiological theories, or explanatory theories, have inherent in them certain "core values and principles" (Ward & Durrant, 2021, p. 3). Identifying the core values is key. In desistance, for example, the observed outcome to try to replicate is cessation from criminal activity, but rehabilitation is not value-free, nor should it be (Ward & Maruna, 2007). Values and assumptions are intricately woven together. For example, Ward and Maruna (2007) assert the validity of the value in helping those who offend achieve a "good life" (See also the Good Lives Model). Even within a strength-based approach that moves people toward the goods they want, attention must be paid to factors that create risk or barriers to success. The figure below demonstrates the

epistemic work needed to create practice guidelines from basic explanatory theories.

Most criminological theories—at least etiological theories—contain more than a single assumption about causality. For example, in Control Theory, the premise is that low self-control explains criminal behavior (Hirschi, 1969). The fix for low self-control might be aging or enhancing informal social control through positive relationships. But is it reasonable to think of aging out as a "fix"? In itself, aging does not explain desistance, just as youth does not explain delinquency, but it is an empirical phenomenon. Attachment to conventional society (and formal social control agents/mechanisms) produces conformity; the lack of attachment contributes to "deviance" (Hirschi, 1969). Yet, in specifying the range of causes/contributors to the attachment or lack thereof, there may be a host: commitment to activities, strength or weakness of ties to parents, teachers, etc. Likewise, in desistance theories, there is no single, magical mechanism by which people move toward a state of law-abiding. Although most theories advance multiple interacting variables, for the sake of elucidating the fundamental elements of explanatory theory to practice guidelines, less complexity would make the task easier.

Crudely, within the research literature, there are two main types of processes responsible for moving people toward a desistant state: external and internal. Within those, there is also a constellation of factors that are regarded as contributing to desistance. These are what Ward and Durrant (2021, p. 3) call "knowledge related assumptions." These assumptions form the definitional basis of the theory. In other words, if one considers that desistance from crime is due to a change in one's identity from "criminal" to "noncriminal," then the object of intervention would be identity. But the knowledge assumptions, in the bridging work of a practice theory, would be the levers one can pull or move to affect identity. Yet identities are more complex than a criminal/noncriminal binary and would also include other knowledge related assumptions, such as other classifications and conceptual bases that are important to the theory.

For example, McNeill (2006) and others (Farrall, 2002) point to the positive power of probation officers in shaping the identity of probationers. Maruna (2001) found that many positive events or people can contribute to the transformation needed to desist. For example, recognition of small changes by family or friends can contribute to the development of a more pro-social identity. Ugelvik (2021) argues that we have undertheorized the role of "trust" in helping people to make good. He explains that extending trust to those incarcerated can be a tool for promoting desistance. As such, there are many factors—macro, meso, and micro— that shape identity, and thus, would be ripe for explication and intervention. Macro factors would include large-scale structural features, such as legal systems; Meso factors would include factors external to the individual yet influential, like one's neighborhood environment, and micro factors would include small-scale interactional dynamics.

One argument would be that having a criminal identity has negative impacts, regardless of criminal activity, even if cessation of criminal activity is the desired outcome. According to Ward and Durrant (2021, p. 3):

...[C]rime is an abstract concept, entirely defined by legal and social norms...What lies underneath or behind crime is arguably more important. Individuals commit offenses because of a number of social and psychological problems, typically evident across the different contexts...For example, intimacy deficits often noted in sexual offending are likely to cause a person discomfort and suffering quite independently of actions directly related to their offending.

While so many criminological theories hope to create an explanation for behavior, and a concomitant intervention into behavior, there is a shared sense that crime is bad and getting to desistance is good. Thus, if we were to characterize the ethical value(s) associated with desistance,

² Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation: <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/research/the-evidence-base-probation/models-and-principles/desistance/>

it would be that the idea of “evil” people is a myth. People do bad things, but have the capacity for living a life in which they stop. This is the essence of a strengths-based approach. However, using concepts like “crime” or types of crimes like “sexual offending” as targets for intervention may be counter-productive because of the enormous variation within those concepts. In other words, as [Ward and Carter \(2019\)](#) propose, the classification systems we use (i.e., the knowledge related assumptions) about the causes of criminal behavior dictate intervention strategies that may or may not be appropriate. Particularly in considering risk profiles, which are based on statistical probabilities and normative assumptions, there is a danger of reifying the classification and ignoring the pro-social motivations behind criminal acts.

Rather than focusing on the myriad pathways to criminal offending, desistance theories engage in analyses of what seems to have worked among desisters ([Bottoms et al., 2004](#); [Healy, 2017](#); [Maruna, 2001, 2004a, 2006, 2012, 2017](#); [Maruna & LeBel, 2003](#); [McNeill, 2006](#); [Nugent & Schinkel, 2016](#); [Shapland & Bottoms, 2011](#); [Shapland et al., 2016](#); [Uggen, 2000](#)). In short, like any explanatory theory, there may be as many pathways out of crime as into it but developing a practice framework for such a theory may prove difficult. For example, we can polarize internal and external factors as an important mechanistic distinction. Internal factors might refer to social-psychological processes that take place before one commit to a crime-free existence, whereas external factors might refer to dynamic aspects of life that happen to a person, like employment, or military service. When we think of aging, though, as a variable in desistance, that is certainly an internal process; there is nothing magic about the body aging per se that promotes desistance. It refers to the change in mind-states that occurs over time as we age. Yet, in considering a practice framework for how to operationalize interventions for change, one would have to invent a time machine to age people out of crime. But what about influential factors independent of aging?

There may be external stabilizing factors that predict desistance and persistence, and internal states of mind that may be shifted by a host of things, notably something that emanates from the external factors. But the early debates about desistance were more basic; [Warr \(1998, p. 210\)](#) describes the deliberations between “ontogenetic” and “sociogenetic” explanations, specifically with respect to whether a person was simply hard-wired for low or high self-control (See [Moffitt, 2006](#)). More recent iterations address the sociogenetic explanations of desistance (and crime) but differ on the factors, mechanisms, confounding factors, and more.

3. Complexity of factors in practice

In a practice framework, [Ward and Durrant \(2021\)](#) argue that the assumptions about causality and the nature of the problem at hand create the conditions for practice guidelines. They refer to this as “level two: knowledge related assumptions.” In other words, desistance theories may value reintegration and conformity as a goal for people, and a premise that people can change. But theorizing about the mechanisms for change is both empirically daunting to measure and observe, and thus, practically tricky to operationalize into interventions.

For instance, if a theory were premised on the notion that substance use disorder (SUD) was the cause of delinquency (rather than a consequence), then the SUD would be targeted for intervention, but the ways to intervene would be dependent upon the factors that contribute to SUD. Were it considered a biological problem, then some sort of biological intervention would make sense. If it were conceived of as a peer influence problem, then the intervention would be different. Thus, the explanatory theories (or explanations of causes) are significant in governing intervention guidelines and practices, but also, they contain with them important values and epistemic foundations. As [Ward and Durrant \(2021, p. 1\)](#) explain about practice theories:

They offer program designers a tool for constructing and delivering a range of interventions to individuals who have committed crimes; an epistemic hub...into which relevant features of explanatory and treatment theories can be “plugged” into.

A practice theory framework for desistance would begin to classify and categorize the types of baked-in premises about how desistance works.

Important to a discussion of desistance, and the way it is understood, is that “criminals” move in and out of delinquent activities, and are not wholly law-abiding, nor law-breaking. But as [Matza \(1964\)](#) explained decades ago, they may have conventional values and aspirations, but “drift” into and out of criminal behavior, depending upon circumstances, which could range from opportunities, peer influence, state of mind (e.g., sense of desperation), etc. Given that most criminologists who embrace a phenomenological perspective on criminal actions would agree that crime is situational, then predicting who and how one might get to a state of desistance is not easy to characterize or operationalize. Clearly, though, social context matters greatly and is comprised of many things. Determining how best to intervene requires an assessment of context, situational factors, factors that influence the factors, and so on.

[Maruna \(2017, p. 8\)](#) describes the shift toward thinking about desistance in criminological circles as moving away from rehabilitation to desistance. He argues that assessing rehabilitation amounts to an evaluation of an intervention and whether or not it works. Desistance, on the other hand, assesses “how it works.” In the event that a particular program or intervention were effective—meaning reduced recidivism or promoted desistance—desistance theorists would aim to answer what factor(s) made the difference.

Desistance is characterized in phases of centrality to identity and belonging. [McNeill \(2014\)](#) formulated an addition to the distinction between primary desistance (behavior change) and secondary desistance (identity shift) advanced by [Maruna \(2004b\)](#); tertiary desistance refers to the sense of belonging one might have, in other words, a sense of place in relation to a community. These distinctions are important for thinking about the relational process between external and internal processes of desistance-promotion. Other scholars have noted that desistance is more of a process than a static state of being; for example, a person may toy with ceasing their criminal activities, try to stop, stop for a while, start again, etc. Researchers focus on understanding what processes, activities, experiences explain when someone is stably desistant.

In consideration of the values and assumptions behind a theory, the desired outcome of desistance (and many criminological theories in practice) is the cessation of crime. One key observation though is that crime can begin and end in fits and starts, can decrease before stopping entirely. There may not be an agreed-upon measure of when can be deemed desistant, perhaps at death ([Farrall et al., 2010](#)). Otherwise, one could be in a protracted hiatus rather than a Desistance, then, is a state of being (i.e., not engaging in criminal behavior anymore), but also a process—perhaps gradual—whereby one becomes less “criminal” over time. As [Farrall et al. \(2010\)](#) express, one problem with defining the theoretical basis for desistance is the temporal aspect of the process.

With respect to the conceptualization of a “practice framework” for promoting change to a desistant state, the articulation of practice guidelines depends upon one’s understanding of the underlying causes or contributors.

4. External versus internal “hooks”

[Laub and Sampson \(2003\)](#) refer to the “knifing off” process, whereby a previously justice-involved individual is able to cut off from their criminal past. Knifing off (p. 149) is a critical event that precedes the ability to desist from crime. What contributes to the knifing off? External factors, according to Laub and Sampson, such as marriage or

employment; these would constitute dynamic risk factors that are changeable. Many desistance authors speak of “turning points” or “hooks” that enable or provide the opportunity for a break from crime (Giordano et al., 2002). According to Giordano et al. (2002), there are four kinds of cognitive processes involved in desistance, including being “open” to change. Certain moments can prime one to being open to change. In this model, the internal cognitive processes are the key to desistance. And yet they may only occur if an external hook manifests. If we think of a new marriage as a turning point, how does it work? Laub and Sampson express that the change in routines contributes, for example, spending less time with delinquent peers, or other activity changes that come with a new, stable relationship. These stabilizing influences confound the issue, however—or the theory—insofar as any significant change in routine could disrupt criminal offending. And in fact, marriage is a complicated variable to ascertain its effects because might people choose marriage because they are ready to change their lives and invest in long-term commitments? In a similar example, Kirk (2011) explains that changing residence can be correlated with a reduction in criminal behavior. Again, though, while moving may shift opportunities and peer influence, it may also indicate a motivation to do so.

The complexity of even describing desistance is essential to underscore: is it a gradual process or abrupt? Is its trajectory standard or highly variable? Is it related to situational factors or individual propensity toward crime, modulated by aging? In addition, what is the interaction of variables, such as marriage and age (Uggen, 2000)? Do the stabilizing factors outlined by Laub and Sampson and others have a differential impact based on other factors, such as age? Laub and Sampson (1993) found that external stabilizing factors, such as securing employment, getting married or a stable relationship, contribute to the likelihood that someone will desist. Other external factors, which are similar to what the RNR model would refer to as “dynamic risk factors” (i.e., changeable), include less exposure to tempting situations (Shapland et al., 2016; Shapland & Bottoms, 2011), or other factors that impel one to drift into deviance.

Finally, do external factors such as employment and marriage impact desistance because they fulfill certain emotional deficits or do they create positive attachments that encourage a feeling of belonging to conventional society? Warr (1998) contests the conclusions that Laub and Sampson draw; whereas they argue that marriage reduces the opportunity for peer interaction, and thus, the influence of delinquent peers, Warr argues that shedding delinquent peers may increase marriageability.

The point here is not to settle these debates about what contributes to desistance, or what might have the greatest impact. In Ward and Durant's (2021) articulation of practice frameworks, the “knowledge related assumptions” is the quicksand in which desistance is mired. Because of the way that myriad factors and distinct processes are considered as contributing to desistance, creating practice guidelines is challenging. But in recent years, the dichotomous thinking around external and internal forces, and structure versus agency have been set aside for a discussion of the relationship between structure and agency (See Farrall & Calverley, 2006). This enduring polarization exists in sociological circles between the deterministic schools of thought and interactionist ones; in other words: either people are determined by social forces, or they are engaged actors in their lives, based on a range of choices. The notion of a “range of choices” is fundamental to understanding the interplay between structure and agency; the assumption is that people do act and make decisions, but within a circumscribed set of options determined by the structures in which they find themselves.

In terms of creating a practice framework, or guideline, Farrall and Calverley (2006, p. 183) contemplate how this works. For example, they argue that, while community supervision may not provide “direct help” to many people, it is “sometimes responsible for other long-term impacts on desistance...by planting seeds of help that can be drawn on when needed.” Similarly, they argue that paying taxes can contribute to a

sense of “citizenship and inclusion” (p. 185) and help people to create an identity as a conscientious person. In this way, they argue for a similar process to Fox (2015:10) who argues that “community integration can be seen as a precursor to successful desistance, rather than an outcome of desistance.” As a practice, acts of inclusion and integration can be the “hooks” to desistance. The prescription might be to integrate people back into the community (or into the community for the first time) to create the identity shifts described by Maruna (2001).

5. Practice frameworks enacted

For many years, as people were released from prison, they received little more than a modest amount of “gate money” and instructions to connect with parole officer within a certain timeframe. While the US recidivism rate is extremely high and unrelenting, the federal government in the US and governments in other western countries as well, (finally) recognized that prison alone was not sufficient to compel law-abiding; in fact, it seemed to have criminogenic effects (Gendreau et al., 1996). Government attention to both reentry and probation/parole in the early 2000s set into motion a collaboration of different agencies that focused on labor, mental health/addiction, education, and housing. The logic behind this investment was that regardless of effective correctional programming while incarcerated, there are a number of obstacles to desistance upon release. Criminal records can be a roadblock in seeking employment or housing, not to the other social factors that impede, such as returning to problematic family or peers, or to environments with little opportunity (Pager, 2007; Umez & Pirius, 2018). The premise behind augmenting reentry services was that these roadblocks needed targeting for intervention, and better release planning by correctional caseworkers was imperative (Seiter & Kadela, 2003).

In a sense, this effort represented desistance theory institutionalized into practice guidelines. The findings from the federal effort are important for informing practice. Essential to good reentry (i.e., desistance promotion) is a) specific targeting of reentry needs; b) customizing programs by population needs; c) refining systems (Council of State Governments, 2018). In the first part of this manuscript, it was noted that some persistence may be due to labeling, others to something else. Thus, and consistent with the conclusions drawn by much existing correctional research, targeting interventions based on individual needs is paramount. Listwan et al. (2006) explained that reentry problems that fail to target criminogenic needs will likely be unsuccessful. As the literature has evolved about what works post-release, it is evident that interventions, such as education or housing, are perhaps necessary but insufficient to lead to a state of enduring desistance (Fox, 2015). Because of the variety of observable knowledge related claims about the mechanism for crime (and its cessation), a clear dotted line from principles to intervention is not possible.

6. Conclusion

Interventions that have the greatest success tend to be the ones that emphasize the strengths of the individual or help to enhance the more pro-social aspects of their selves. Chouhy et al. (2020) found that there are multiple pathways to desistance, ranging from those that are most aligned with life course research to paths that are consistent with the cognitive transformation (i.e., identity shift) literature. The important thread through these pathways is “social supports.” Just as Sutherland (1947) asserted in “differential association theory,” people will engage in delinquency when the social supports for doing so are greater than those against it. In other words, it is learned, but not in a social vacuum. Through the process of meaning-making, social supports encourage or dissuade individuals from any number of actions or behaviors; unlearning them is a similar process for which we may be rewarded.

One of the knowledge claims about desistance is the role that social capital formation plays in creating the conditions for change (Farrall, 2011; Fox, 2015). There has been a drive within desistance research to

harness the concept of social capital as a way to illustrate the relationship between structural elements in desistance and the socio-psychological process of internal narrative shifts. Social capital rests at the nexus between these two dynamic aspects.

Kay (2020, p. 14) explains that desistance researchers tend to characterize social capital “by its effects rather than its components,” which is problematic because, in essence, there are push and pull factors that are part of the process in moving in and out of criminal behavior. In other words, social capital—which refers to the web of relationships that might foster the achievement of certain goods—could be pro- or anti-social; Kay (2020) argues that we need to distinguish between them. In other words, social influence and supports are important but are not all created equal in terms of progress toward desistance.

In particular, in considering policy formation or implementation, and quasi-treatment guidelines, community supervision staff, case-workers, and community residents would target social isolation or anti-social peer networks for intervention. One model for doing so is the Circle of Support & Accountability (CoSA) model. By design, the CoSA model targets the social needs of those coming out of prison (usually those convicted of sexual offenses, as they may be more socially isolated). The model is simple: create a small, dedicated group of volunteers to help tackle the emotional, social, and practical needs of individuals returning to their community (Duwe, 2012; Fox, 2015; Wilson et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2008; Wilson et al., 2009; Wilson & Picheca, 2005; Wilson et al., 2011; Wilson et al., 2005, 2007; Wilson, Prinzo, 2001a, 2001b). Operationalizing practice guidelines from desistance theory (if the mechanism in question is creating pro-social relationships) is easier to conceive than some other mechanisms. The hooks for developing a “redemption” narrative (Maruna, 2001, 2004a, 2006, 2012, 2017; Maruna & LeBel, 2003; McNeill, 2006) through relationships could be simply providing a pool of helpful people to reinforce that narrative.

An unsolved piece of the practice framework puzzle is the fact that there are many factors that can contribute to, or undermine, progress in desistance. For some, employment may be the necessary hook for change; for others, social support may be an important catalyst for engaging in stable employment or relationships. Various points along the path can create “drift” into or out of delinquency, based on a host of things. Reentry/resettlement programs and policies have changed in the past decade or so to include greater assistance with employment options, and housing, which may lead to more stable relationships (e.g., marriage). To the extent that correctional staff can be trained to attend to more than risk factors, and needs that are framed as risk markers, and instead reframe their roles in their clients' success to align with a strengths-based approach, this would reflect the findings from desistance research translated into practice.

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