



## Chapter 4

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# The desistance paradigm in correctional practice: from programs to lives

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### Introduction

Interventions for reducing reoffending are frequently criticised for not being based upon a foundation of empirical evidence (see Latessa *et al.* 2002). As a response, over the past three decades, there has been a sustained international movement, sometimes known as the 'what works' movement, to promote 'evidence-based' best practices in criminal justice. In some ways, the present moment may be the pinnacle of this 'what works' movement internationally. For instance, at a recent National Institute of Justice Annual Conference, US President Barack Obama's Attorney General Eric Holder warmed many academic hearts in the room when he said:

Let me be clear: this administration shares your belief in the power of evidence-based research to help address some of our nation's most significant challenges. President Obama has renewed our nation's commitment to rely on science in the development of public policy. He understands, as I do, that sound judgement derives from solid evidence. (Austin 2009)

However, evidence-based practice has been the buzzword in the United Kingdom at least since the emergence of New Labour in 1997, and there are some indications that the welcome for effectiveness research has worn somewhat thin. Most infamously, New Labour's crime advisor (or crime 'czar') Louise Casey has been heard to remark, 'If No. 10 says bloody "evidence-based policy" to me one more time, I'll deck them' (Bowcott 2005).

In this chapter, we describe an emerging way of thinking about evidence-based practice, sometimes referred to as the 'desistance paradigm' (McNeill 2006; Porporino 2010); this approach focuses less on evaluation evidence of 'what works', and instead draws from criminological research on 'how change works'. We begin by outlining what we see as the key features of this paradigm and contrast it to the traditional correctional paradigm. Next, we provide one possible illustration (out of many) of what the desistance paradigm might look like in practice. Like the 'what works' evaluation literature (and indeed any body of scientific research), the research on desistance from crime is a dynamic and contested literature. For the purposes of this chapter, we have therefore chosen to focus on only one strand of the desistance work – not coincidentally the one that our own research has contributed to – for illustrative purposes. In the final section, we outline the policy implications of this particular strand of the desistance literature in order to demonstrate how one application of the desistance paradigm might actually take shape in practice.

### **The promise of a desistance paradigm**

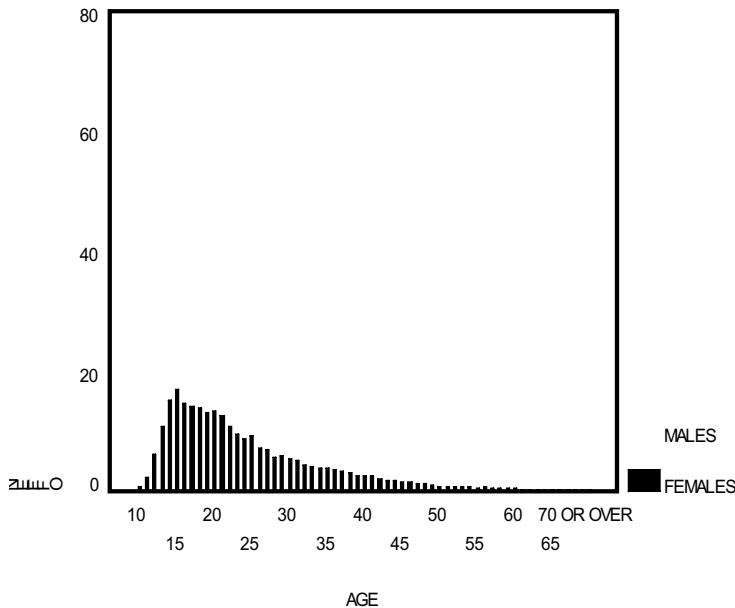
What works in reducing crime? There are two ways to answer this. One common strategy is to review the evaluation evidence (in particular randomised control trials) of programmes designed to target criminality. Yet this is not the only type of evidence that might help answer this question.

Take the following example. In a recent article with the provocative title 'Why crime went away', the American news weekly *Time Magazine* tries to grapple with the sharp drop in the rates of murder and violent crime in the United States over the past 20 years (Von Drehle 2010). The article begins by quoting a number of police chiefs who, of course, claim that all the credit goes to police chiefs, but then surveys academic criminologists who instead point to the changing age demographics of American society. It is well known, for instance, that crime waves are associated with large numbers of young people in a population; most famously, the coming of age of the 'baby boomer' generation in the 1960s and 1970s corresponded to a huge increase in crime. With the baby boom generation approaching retirement, however – and even their children approaching middle age! – the current American age profile has shifted discernibly. Whereas the median age for Americans at the peak of the crime wave that began in the 1960s was 32 years old, by 2010 the median age of Americans

had risen to over 36 years old. Criminologists see this correlation as far more than a coincidence. The *Time Magazine* article concludes: 'Violence is typically a young man's vice; it has been said that the most effective crime-fighting tool is a 30th birthday' (Von Drehle 2010: 24).

In other words, maturation is more powerful than any 'program' designed by the police, prison service or others to reduce crime. This argument is certainly supported by considerable evidence. For most individuals, participation in 'street crimes' like burglary, robbery and drug sales (the types of offences of most concern to criminologists) generally begins in the early teenage years, peaks rapidly in late adolescence or young adulthood, and dissipates before the person reaches 30 years of age (see Figure 4.1).

Official conviction statistics, like those represented graphically in Figure 4.1, are not easy to interpret and might be skewed by any number of factors (older offenders may be better at avoiding apprehension than young people, might be more likely to die or spend long periods incarcerated, and so forth). However, longitudinal cohort



**Figure 4.1** Recorded offender rates per 1,000 relevant population by age-year and sex, England and Wales, 2000.

Source: Bottoms et al. (2004).

studies such as the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development (CSDD) consistently confirm that the primary reason that relatively few street crimes are committed by older persons is that they have desisted from these behaviours. Farrington (1992), for instance, found that for the CSDD sample, self-reported criminal behaviour peaks at around age 17 or 18 and decreases sharply as the young adults progress through their twenties.

For precisely this reason, policy researchers like Dan A. Lewis (1990) have called for a shift from thinking about 'programmes' to thinking about 'lives'. Lewis points out that almost all of the research evidence suggests that 'programmes' have a remarkably minor impact on life outcomes like going to prison, and yet policy researchers devote all of our time to evaluating them. Lewis instead suggests that we turn our lens to human lives in their full biographical and historical context to better understand why and how programmes work for some individuals and why (most often) they fail.

This shift of lenses has become a core element of the desistance paradigm and one of the major contrasts to the correctional or 'medical model' model of change (see Bazemore and Stinchcomb 2004). McNeill (2006: 46), for instance, explains this 'desistance paradigm' thus: 'Put simply, the implication is that offender management services need to think of themselves less as providers of correctional treatment (that belongs to the expert) and more as supporters of desistance processes (that belong to the desister).' Likewise, Porporino (2010: 80) writes: 'The desistance paradigm suggests that we might be better off if we allowed offenders to guide us instead, listened to what they think might best fit their individual struggles out of crime, rather than continue to insist that our solutions are their salvation.'

The desistance paradigm starts by asking what is empirically known about why some individuals persist in criminal behaviour over time and others desist from criminal behaviour. Then, it seeks to determine how interventions can support or accelerate approximations of these 'organically' occurring processes (see Farrall 2004; Halsey 2006; Harris 2005; Lewis 2005; Maguire and Raynor 2006; Maruna *et al.* 2004; McNeill 2003; Raynor and Robinson 2005; Rex 1999; Robinson 2008; Robinson and Crow 2009; Rungay 2004; Ward and Maruna 2007). This idea has animated desistance researchers at least since Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck (1937: 205), who wondered: 'Can educators, psychologists, correctional workers, and others devise means of "forcing the plant", as it were, so that benign maturation will occur earlier than it seems to at present?' Of course, criminal justice interventions can work the other way as well, impeding the

normative processes of maturation rather than speeding it up. Indeed, arguably, the majority of criminal justice interventions derail rather than facilitate the normative processes of maturation associated with desistance from crime (see Lieblich and Maruna 2005).

Traditionally, questions of process – or the dynamics of change – have been ignored in the effectiveness literature or kept inside what is called the ‘black box’ of treatment research (see Pawson and Tilley 1997; Maruna 2001; Farrall 2002). ‘What works’ literature typically begins with a review of the evaluation research on existing international (mostly North American) programmes, and advocates the importation of those models that have been demonstrably successful into other jurisdictions. Yet, disappointing evaluation results of rehabilitative interventions in England and Wales (see Harper and Chitty 2004) have led many in corrections to focus less on the importation of models that have been successful elsewhere (‘what works’) and instead to focus on issues of implementation, delivery and effective practice (‘how change works’) (see especially Maguire 2004; Raynor 2004). This has opened a door at least temporarily to desistance research in the United Kingdom and elsewhere and generated considerable interest in the topic internationally (Serin and Lloyd 2009).

The precise nature of what the desistance paradigm actually entails remains somewhat undefined and the theoretical models are only in the earliest stages of development. Nonetheless, some consistent themes have started to emerge in these efforts to define the paradigm. Several observers (see, for example, McNeill 2006; Raynor and Robinson 2005) have compared the desistance framework to the ‘non-treatment paradigm’ first developed by Bottoms and McWilliams (1979). Writing at the height of the ‘nothing works’ backlash against treatment, Bottoms and McWilliams argued for a shift in thinking in probation away from ‘treatment’ models towards ‘help’ models, away from ‘diagnosis’ and towards ‘shared assessment’, and away from ‘client needs’ towards ‘collaborative defined tasks’. McNeill (2006) and other advocates of the desistance paradigm have updated this list with the benefit of two decades of desistance research.

Farrall (2004) distinguishes ‘desistance-focused’ perspectives from ‘offending-related’ approaches on the basis that whereas the latter concentrates on targeting or correcting offender deficits, the former seeks to promote those things thought to be associated with desistance (such as strong social bonds, pro-social involvements and social capital) (Farrall 2002). Although ‘subtle’, this distinction is crucial, as desistance from crime may be associated with completely

different factors from those that predispose a person to crime in the first place (Harris 2005). For instance, although much research demonstrates that convicted offenders 'think differently' from non-offenders, there is much less evidence that changing these thinking patterns is associated with desistance from crime, nor does such knowledge provide guidance as to how ex-offenders should think differently (Maruna 2001).

Offenders might begin offending, in part at least, because of their impulsivity, failure to attend to consequences, preference for anti-social associates, unstructured lifestyles and emerging pro-criminal sentiments ... and so on. But it doesn't follow that a reversal in these anti-social personality traits, behaviours and attitudes is what is key in moving offenders into desistance, or even in maintaining it. (Porporino 2010: 69)

Others have argued for a shift from 'deficit-based' interventions (focusing on risk factors and 'needs' as defined by the experts) to 'strengths-based' approaches that seek to promote 'good lives' as defined by the person him or herself (Burnett and Maruna 2006; Ward and Maruna 2007). Bazemore (1996: 48) argues that with its 'singular focus on the psychological needs and social deficits of the offender', traditional correctional interventions characterise prisoners and probationers as 'objects of remedial services or therapeutic interventions'. This means that intervention efforts seek to empower individuals to achieve the sorts of attachments, roles and life situations that appear to be empirically associated with successful social engagement upon release (Farrall 2004; Ward and Brown 2004). Many have drawn parallels here to community reintegration efforts (Petersilia 2003; Travis 2005), restorative justice (Bazemore and Maruna 2009), and 'rights-based rehabilitation' (Rotman 1990), where any 'treatment' provided is primarily intended to counter the harmful side-effects of imprisonment.

All of these differences make the desistance paradigm distinct from traditional approaches to rehabilitation. Indeed, these differences may be the most apparent where they matter the most: from the perspective of prisoners and probationers themselves. Drawing on her extensive work with prisoners in Pennsylvania, Harris (2005) argues: 'Many people who are currently or were formerly in prison embrace the self-change, empowerment, and desistance perspective.' At the same time, however, 'They hold negative attitudes toward the concept of rehabilitation and correctional treatment programs.'

In general, the distaste for such programs is linked to a sense that these interventions involve things being 'done to' or 'prescribed for' passive recipients who are characterized as deficient, ineffectual, misguided, untrustworthy, possibly dangerous, and almost certain to get into trouble again. Although people who have been incarcerated often believe that some staff members or other outside parties and some types of programs can be helpful, their effectiveness stems from the potential they offer for empowering participants rather than trying to compel them to change. Most argue, 'No one else can rehabilitate you. You rehabilitate yourself.' If there is distaste for correctional treatment programs among people under correctional supervision, there is even stronger antipathy toward interventions tailored to actuarial risk assessments. (Harris 2005: 318)

Although the preferences of criminal justice clients are not typically viewed as being highly relevant to policy-makers, it needs to be emphasised that if members of this target population do not engage with or commit themselves to an intervention, the 'treatment' is unlikely to succeed. Indeed, the drop-out/retention rates for most rehabilitative interventions are abysmal and the true level of engagement among even those who do attend regularly is often minimal to say the least (see Maruna *et al.* 2009). Programme completion has been a consistent problem in the implementation of treatment programmes throughout the UK (McMurran and McCulloch 2007). Attrition rates range from 10 per cent for some prison-based CBT trials (see Cann *et al.* 2003) to over 65 per cent for some community-based CBT interventions (see Steele and Van Arendsen 2001; Hollin *et al.* 2004). The Crime Reduction Programme's pathfinder evaluation of the Enhanced Thinking Skills (ETS) programme, for instance, found that of the 4,089 individuals allocated to the programme, only 1,311 went on to complete the entire course, resulting in a completion rate of 32.1 per cent (Palmer *et al.* 2007: 255). These high drop-out rates make it difficult to accurately assess the success of the programme, and more worryingly suggest a lack of engagement among probationers and prisoners (see McMurran and McCulloch 2007).

The desistance paradigm – based as it is on the experiences of successfully reformed ex-offenders themselves – takes the views and voices of correctional clients very seriously and assigns the issue of 'motivation' a central role in understanding the change process (see Farrall 2004; McMurran and Ward 2004). As desistance is understood as an agentic process in this framework, any rehabilitation option



offered to prisoners and probationers needs to make sense to clients themselves and be clearly relevant to the possibility of their living better lives (Miller and Rollnick 2002; Prochaska and Levesque 2002; Trotter 1999). This is not always the case in the traditional correctional paradigm. Porporino (2010: 63) writes:

In this exuberant momentum towards a directed and prescriptive *change-the-offender* agenda in corrections ... we may have blinded ourselves to other ways of approaching the challenge ... We may have narrowed in on too few approaches, too prematurely, and with too much uncertainty about the real process of change that offenders move through.

In sum, the desistance paradigm argues that the search for 'what works' should not begin with existing expert models of crime reduction, but rather should begin with an understanding of the organic or normative processes that seem to impact offending patterns over the life course. That is, if turning 30 is the 'most effective crime-fighting tool' (Von Drehle 2010), then we should seek to learn as much as we can about that process and see if we can model these dynamics in our own interventions. Questions remain, however, about what such a desistance paradigm may look like in practice. It is easy to critique existing practices; it is far more difficult (and dangerous) to put forward an alternative. In the following section, we try to do just that by sketching out one possible 'desistance-focused' intervention.

### **A labelling model for desistance-based practice**

There is no single 'desistance theory' any more than there can be said to be a single theory of crime or of poverty. As with any area of social scientific study, the literature on desistance from crime is dynamic with numerous theoretical strands competing and combining to explain the phenomenon at hand (see, for example, Sampson and Laub 1993; Warr 1998; Giordano *et al.* 2002). Below we focus on one particular theoretical explanation of both persistence in, and desistance from, criminal behaviour. We make no pretence at neutrality here: this area of desistance theory happens to be one typically associated with the two authors of this chapter (see Maruna 2001; Maruna *et al.* 2009). However, this framework is also useful because it builds directly upon previous research on desistance by others and seeks to complement rather than compete with these theoretical frameworks.



*A labelling perspective on persistence*

Among the best-developed frameworks for understanding persistence in offending over time is Terrie Moffitt's (1993) highly influential theory of life-course persistent and adolescence-limited criminality. At the heart of her theory are bio-psychosocial factors such as subclinical neuropsychological difficulties involving attention deficits, impulsivity and low self-control, but also problems with verbal and 'executive' functions, leading to frustration in efforts to communicate. According to Moffitt's theory, these difficulties are primarily caused by heredity and disruption in the development of the foetal brain (due to maternal alcohol/drug use). Such factors are largely outside of the purview of rehabilitative interventions (although not prevention work).

However, Moffitt also argues that these neurological factors interact in a dynamic fashion with social-environmental factors, and these social factors are more dynamic and subject to manipulation. In particular, Moffitt (1993; see also Caspi and Moffitt 1995) describes three types of person-environment interactions thought to be implicated in the persistence of criminality over the life course:

- reactive interactions
- proactive interactions
- evocative interactions.

*Reactive interactions* involve the socio-cognitive interpretations that life-course persistent offenders typically make about the social world around them. Based on their personality traits, such individuals often interpret the same stimuli differently or pick up different cues from the social environment than their peers. The best example of this is the 'hostile attribution bias' identified by Kenneth Dodge (1993). Dodge found that offenders are more likely than others to attribute hostile intentions to apparently ambiguous social interactions (for example, the stare of a stranger or an accidental collision between two pedestrians).

In *proactive interactions* individuals with certain characteristics will seek out situations that are compatible with their dispositions. This involves the self-selection into occupations and peer networks that support and help to sustain certain personality traits, as well as assortative mating whereby life partners are chosen among those who are most receptive to a person's faults. By selecting these environments, individuals have fewer deterrents to change their ways.

Finally, *evocative interactions* include the reactions that certain individuals evoke from the social environment that ironically and unintentionally help to maintain and escalate the individual's pattern of anti-social behaviour. Criminality has long been understood as a 'transaction' by labelling theorists and interactionists (see Lemert 1951; Toch 1997): an individual does something, others react to it, and these reactions, themselves, often lead to further criminality. In what Patterson (1993) refers to as 'coercive cycles', laboratory-based research has demonstrated that certain young people can literally evoke 'poor parenting' behaviours from adults (that is, precisely the 'wrong' sort of modelling behaviours to encourage the young person to desist).

In summary, Moffitt (1993) argues that individuals can become 'ensnared by the consequences of antisocial behaviour'. She describes offending as having both 'contemporary' and 'cumulative consequences' across the life course. In the latter, behaviours at one stage in the human development process (such as failure to pay attention in primary school) can have lasting, cumulative consequences at later stages (such as frustration and disadvantage in secondary school), which leads down a slippery slope towards life-course persistent criminality (skipping school, followed by early drop-out, leading to poor work opportunities, which in turn can encourage involvement in offending, which can lead to a criminal record, which can further reduce work opportunities, leading to personal frustration – in a vicious, repeating cycle). In other words, the fact that past behaviour is the best predictor of future behaviour does not necessarily mean that some individuals are permanently or somehow 'naturally' deviant. The continuity in criminal behaviour over time may instead be accounted for through predictable environmental interactions or 'cumulative disadvantages' enhanced by criminal engagement itself. Offenders, although certainly disadvantaged in many ways, may be perfectly capable of leading non-criminal lives were it not for this social-environmental cycle of cumulative continuity.

This is, of course, the key premise behind the idea of labelling theory in criminology, described by Sampson and Laub (1997) as the only truly longitudinal or life-course theory in the classic criminology canon. Indeed, labelling theory has found its greatest empirical support from the best-developed longitudinal research following cohorts of offenders over long periods (see, for example, Farrington 1977). Life-course criminologists like Sampson and Laub (1997) and Braithwaite (1989), therefore, have argued convincingly in favour of resuscitating labelling theory – which had suffered unfair criticism in the 1980s

(see Paternoster and Iovanni 1989; Petrunik 1980) – in the cause of understanding such criminal persistence. Sampson and Laub (1997) argue that persistent offending may not necessarily be attributable to permanent traits of individuals, but could also be explained by a process of ‘cumulative continuity’ whereby future opportunities to lead a conventional life are ‘knifed off’ as a consequence of choices made in adolescence. They argue that deviant behaviour might be seen as a kind of ‘chimera’ (Patterson 1993), ‘mortgaging one’s future’ (Nagin and Paternoster 1991) by blocking opportunities for achieving success in employment, education, and even in marriage. Braithwaite (1989) argues that when society’s reaction to deviants is to stigmatise, segregate and exclude, such persons are left with limited opportunity for achieving self-respect and affiliation in the mainstream – but are welcomed among subcultural groups of similarly stigmatised outcasts. Hence, the vicious circle of persistent offending.

Labelling theory has received considerable empirical support in recent years (see, for example, Bernburg and Krohn 2003; Bernburg *et al.* 2006; Taxman and Piquero 1998; Fagan *et al.* 2003; Hagan and Palloni 1990). In a study of 95,919 men and women who were either adjudicated or had adjudication withheld, Chiricos and colleagues (2007) found that those who were formally labelled were significantly more likely to recidivate within two years than those who were not. Interestingly, Bernburg and colleagues (2006) found that the process worked in much the same way as theorised by Braithwaite: intervention by the juvenile justice system predicted involvement with deviant gangs, which then led to increased offending. LeBel and colleagues (2008) also found that individual perceptions of being stigmatised are an important mediating mechanism in the return to criminality. Research participants in the LeBel study who reported feeling stigmatised and socially excluded during a prison-based interview were more likely to be reconvicted and reimprisoned in a ten-year follow-up study, even after controlling for the number of social problems the individual experienced after release. In the sample, only two out of the 40 (5 per cent) participants who felt that ex-convicts were stigmatised were not reconvicted of a crime, versus 24 per cent (21/86) of participants who did not perceive stigma against them.

In short, desisting from crime is a difficult process, especially for those who are deeply entrenched in criminal networks and living in disadvantaged circumstances. Successfully changing one’s life in such circumstances requires a tremendous amount of self-belief, and this is made highly difficult, if not impossible, when those around a person

believe the person will fail. Interviews with long-term, persistent offenders suggest that many of these individuals develop a sense of hopelessness and despair, believing that all legitimate opportunities have been blocked for them (see Maruna 2001).

#### *A labelling perspective on desistance*

How, then, is it possible for long-term persistent offenders, caught up in these cycles, to desist from criminal behaviour? We argue (see Maruna 2001; Maruna *et al.* 2009) that desistance may be best facilitated when the desisting person's change in behaviour is recognised by others and reflected back to him in a 'delabelling process' (Trice and Roman 1970).

In our work we draw upon Rosenthal's so-called 'Pygmalion effects', from educational psychology, to argue that the *high* expectations of others can lead to greater self-belief (and subsequent performance) in individuals (Rosenthal and Jacobson 1992). Here, the term Pygmalion derives from the Greek myth of the sculptor who falls in love with his statue, bringing it to life, and the subsequent George Bernard Shaw drama about a peasant girl transformed into a society lady. In *Pygmalion in the Classroom*, Rosenthal and Jacobson (1992) describe Pygmalion effects as the influence of teachers' beliefs about a student's abilities on the student's self-beliefs and subsequent performance in the classroom. When teachers were made to believe that their students could achieve great things, the students began to believe this, and their outcomes confirmed this optimism (see also McNatt 2000).

We argue that personal transformation (or 'recovery' in the highly related arena of addiction treatment) also contains a looking-glass element. People start to believe that they can successfully change their lives when those around them start to believe they can. In other words, rehabilitation (or recovery) is a construct that is negotiated through interaction between an individual and significant others (Shover 1996: 144). Not only must a person accept conventional society in order to go straight, but conventional society must accept that this person has changed as well. Meisenhelder (1977: 329), for instance, uncovered what he calls a 'certification' stage of desistance, whereby 'some recognized member(s) of the conventional community must publicly announce and certify that the offender has changed and that he is now to be considered essentially noncriminal' (Meisenhelder 1977, 329). This 'status elevation ceremony' served 'publicly and formally to announce, sell and spread the fact of the Actor's new

kind of being' (Lofland 1969: 227), and effectively worked to counter the stigma of the person's criminal record. According to Makkai and Braithwaite (1993: 74), such recognition of efforts to reform can have 'cognitive effects on individuals through nurturing law-abiding identities, building cognitive commitments to try harder, encouraging individuals who face adversity not to give up ... and nurturing belief in oneself'.

There is scattered support for these sorts of Pygmalion effects in the behavioural reform process. Maruna (2001), for example, found evidence of what he calls 'redemption rituals' in the life stories of successfully desisting ex-convicts. As with the 'degradation ceremony' (Garfinkel 1956) through which wrongdoers are stigmatised, these de-labelling ceremonies are directed not at specific acts, but to the whole character of the person in question (Braithwaite and Braithwaite 2001: 16). Although this research is retrospective in nature, it is supported by some experimental work inside and outside the laboratory. In one ingenious real-world experiment, for example, Leake and King (1977) informed treatment professionals that they had developed a scientific test to determine who among a group of patients were most likely to be successful in recovering from alcoholism. In reality, no such test had been developed. The patients identified as 'most likely to succeed' were picked purely at random. Still, the clients who were assigned this optimistic prophecy turned out to be far more likely to give up drinking than members of the control group. Apparently, they believed in their own ability to achieve sobriety because the professionals around them seemed to believe it so well (see also Miller 1998).

Outside of criminological research, of course, hundreds of different studies have found confirmation for the idea that one person's expectations for the behaviour of another can actually impact on the other person's behaviour. Meta-analyses of studies conducted both inside and outside the research laboratory suggest an average effect size or correlation ( $r$ ) of over .30 in studies of interpersonal expectancy effects (Rosenthal 2002; Kierein and Gold 2000). In the most famous example, Rosenthal and Jacobson (1992) found that teacher expectancies of student performance were strongly predictive of student performance on standardised tests, and that manipulating these educator biases and beliefs could lead to substantial improvements in student outcomes (see also Miller *et al.* 1975). A nursing home study demonstrated that raising caretakers' expectations for residents' health outcomes led to a significant reduction in levels of depression among residents (Learman *et al.* 1990). Similar Pygmalion effects and

expectancy-linked outcomes have been found in courtroom studies, business schools, and numerous different workplaces (for example, Babad *et al.* 1982; Eden 1984; McNatt 2000; Reynolds 2007; see Rosenthal 2002, for a review).

Whether the same processes could be called into play in the rehabilitation process remains an open question. Performance on standardised tests or even in a factory setting is far different from criminal recidivism, as the latter is arguably impacted by a wider variety of influences. At the same time, criminal behaviour may involve a greater element of choice or agency than is involved in exam performance (Laub and Sampson 2003). It might be, then, that Pygmalion processes could be more influential in criminology than in education.

#### *Implications of the pro-social labelling perspective for policy*

If this argument around the importance of labelling to criminal persistence and desistance is supported in future research (and this remains an 'if'), then what policy implications would such evidence have for work with probationers and prisoners? First and most obviously, if stigma and labelling influence the longevity and persistence of criminal behaviour over time, as the research increasingly suggests, then policy efforts should seek to avoid such penalties, removing barriers to full participation in society whenever possible.

Where criminal sanctions have already created stigma and applied labels, perhaps the strongest form of symbolic de-labelling an offender could receive from the state is the chance to officially wipe the slate clean and move on from the stigma of one's criminal record. Research on desistance from crime refers to such a process as 'knifing off' one's criminal past whereby individuals sever themselves from past selves and personal entanglements by moving away, or joining the military, and starting over (Laub and Sampson 2003; Maruna and Roy 2007). The past cannot be taken away, of course, and nothing can undo the harm that has been done. Convictions, on the other hand, are merely labels given by the state in the name of punishment, and equally these can be taken away or sealed in the name of reintegration, along with a restoration of the full civil rights, liberties and duties that all of us share (Uggen *et al.* 2004). Such rewards provide an opportunity for qualified individuals with criminal records to demonstrate that they have paid their debt to society and earned the right to have statutory bars to jobs or other services lifted, as well as to have civil rights and public benefits reinstated (Choo 2007).

There are numerous examples of such systems of sealing and expungement of criminal records internationally, notably including the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 in the United Kingdom. However, almost all of these opportunities, including the UK Act, are only available to individuals who have already been successful in desisting from crime for long periods of time (typically five or more years). In Canada, former prisoners are eligible to apply for formal 'pardons' after remaining crime-free over a specified waiting period. Although almost all applicants are successful, only a tiny fraction of ex-offenders actually apply. Ruddell and Winfree (2006) estimate the take-up at less than 5 per cent of those convicted between 1996 and 2002. In the United States, 'certificates of good conduct' or 'certificates of rehabilitation' can be issued by state authorities (such as prisoner review boards) to law-abiding ex-prisoners, but these are currently used very sparingly and by only a handful of US states (Love and Frazier 2006; Samuels and Mukamal 2004).

The research on labelling and criminal careers would suggest that, to be useful, such opportunities might be made available earlier in the desistance process. Ex-prisoners, for example, might be allowed to 'earn' a pardon or 'certificate of rehabilitation' through doing volunteer work or making other efforts to make amends for what they have done (Maruna and LeBel 2003). One advantage of this would be that individuals could earn a pardon after only a short time in the community or even during one's period of incarceration in some instances. Another advantage would be that this would make the rehabilitation process 'active' rather than 'passive'. That is, one would have to 'do something' to earn the right to be rehabilitated, rather than simply wait for the passage of time (for instance, the usual five to seven years of crime-free behaviour that is currently required to prove one's reform).

The award of such certificates or pardons may provide an ideal opportunity to mimic or orchestrate the sorts of organic rituals of reintegration observed in studies of desistance (see Leong 2006; Maruna 2001). Indeed, this research suggests that de-labelling might be most potent when coming from 'on high', particularly official sources like treatment professionals or teachers, rather than from family members or friends – where such acceptance can be taken for granted (Wexler 2001). Moreover, if the de-labelling were to be endorsed and supported by the same social control establishment involved in the 'status degradation' process of conviction and sentencing (judges or peer juries), this public redemption might carry considerable social and psychological weight for participants and observers (see Maruna and LeBel 2003; Travis 2005, for development of this idea).



The idea that such positive acknowledgement can be crucial to the consolidation of a non-criminal identity is a theory that is shared, at least implicitly, by many ex-prisoner professionals who now work to support other ex-prisoners. The following quotes are from ex-prisoner staff at a large New York-based halfway house and job training programme:

**Counselor 1:** My philosophy is pretty simple: Show them that you believe in them, and they believe in themselves.

**Counselor 2:** I had a client who said to me I have 30 days clean. He has never had that in his life. That is tremendous, because he's not in our housing, we're not monitoring him. He walks almost 2 miles to come here to the clinic on his own. You understand what I'm saying to you? That's a step. With that individual I would say to him 'congratulations'. We would clap and we would be happy. To this point he has achieved a milestone. It's like achieving his [high school diploma], gee whiz. That's how important it is to the guy. And (we have to) acknowledge that. (Maruna *et al.* 2009)

The role of significant others (including, perhaps especially, authority figures) in recognising efforts at reform and 'certifying' desistance through ritual, pro-social labelling and formal recognition is one possible policy implication of this strand of the desistance literature.

### **Last words: the irony of the desistance paradigm**

There is something ironic and possibly dangerous about the notion of a desistance paradigm for rehabilitation work. After all, the study of desistance emerged as a sort of antithesis of rehabilitation. Rehabilitation was seen as a top-down, medical model whereby professionals sought to change or 'correct' individuals, whereas desistance was framed as a more naturalistic process that took place without any official intervention. Ex-prisoners who give up crime were said to experience either rehabilitation or else spontaneous desistance, as if these were very different processes.

These assumptions have been challenged in recent desistance research (see especially Maruna *et al.* 2004). Although it is true that ex-prisoners typically adhere to the notion that 'You rehabilitate yourself', very few desisting former offenders would take full credit for their own life turnarounds. Most will typically credit family,

friends, and even some professionals with being extremely helpful along the way (Maruna 2001). The real lesson of desistance research, therefore, is not that ex-offenders should be left alone to 'get on with' the business of self-change. The process of desistance takes far too long and leaves too many victims in its wake. The lesson of desistance research is that correctional interventions should recognise this 'natural' (or at least normative) process of reform and design interventions that can enhance or complement these spontaneous efforts (Farrall 2002; McNeill 2006; Raynor and Robinson 2005).

Increasingly, then, the desistance paradigm has begun to frame rehabilitation as a relational process best achieved in the context of relationships with others (Bazemore 1996). In fact, the interest in desistance research has corresponded very closely with a revival of interest in 'relational rehabilitation' (Raynor and Robinson 2005). Some advocate that rehabilitation work itself should be devolved by the state on to families and communities, in a process akin to that of justice reinvestment (Tucker and Cadora 2003). In an essay titled 'Who owns resettlement?', for instance, Maruna (2006) argues that reintegration belongs to communities and ex-prisoners and has been 'stolen' away by the state.

At the same time, desistance research is increasingly coming to the attention of the state, and policy-makers have found several implications of the research to be useful in efforts to reduce crime. The theoretical strand of desistance research reviewed above has many implications for what the state can do wrong in terms of stigmatising and labelling individuals if it wants to reduce reoffending. At the same time, the labelling literature also suggests specific policies that might reduce reoffending through de-labelling as well. This research is not as prescriptive as the 'what works' evidence, but may be just as important in the formulation of effective practice in crime reduction.

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