Experiencing the Psychological, Social and Subjective Dimensions Associated with Desistance from Offending: A Review of the Literature

Kate G Walker, Mrs, Coventry University
Erica Bowen, Dr., Coventry University
Sarah Brown, Dr., Coventry University
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Abstract
The fact that the majority of offenders eventually terminate their criminal careers is well established in the literature. What still remain unclear, however, are the underlying mechanisms responsible for this process and its maintenance, meaning that desistance from crime is poorly understood. Research on desistance is fraught with definitional, operationalisation and measurement inconsistencies. This comprehensive review of the literature revealed three common conceptual frameworks that have been employed to explain desistance: population heterogeneity (criminal propensity); state dependence (social control i.e. good marriage, stable employment); and subjective change (personal agency). The literature suggests that as the process of desistance and its maintenance is complex, explanations regarding its causal mechanisms and maintenance are unlikely to be found in a single conceptual framework. This indicates that an integrated and interactive model of desistance, which acknowledges the role of individual stable traits, social / environmental factors and individual subjective change, is required in order to start developing a comprehensive understanding of how individuals cease their offending behaviour and remain crime free. If this is more clearly understood, research-based treatment can then be developed.
Introduction

It is well established that the commission of crime declines with age throughout the whole population (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990) and so most offenders ultimately stop offending. This pattern of offending, known as the age-crime curve, has been stringently tested and suggests that offending peaks in early adulthood and falls thereafter but at a steady rate during the 30s and 40s and so forth (Blumstein et al. 1986, Piquero, Farrington and Blumstein 2003). The mechanisms that explain this phenomenon, however, remain under dispute. The term ‘criminal career’ is a metaphor that focuses on an individual’s offending over time with Farrington (1997: 361), for example, suggesting that a criminal career is the “longitudinal sequence of offences committed by an individual offender”. At minimum, it has been suggested that a criminal career has a beginning (onset) and an end (desistance) with the ‘career’ (duration) in the middle (Soothill, Fitzpatrick and Francis 2009). Research into offending behaviour is traditionally cross-sectional and only provides a ‘snapshot’ of offending. Little is known about the causal processes underlying desistance (Kazemian 2007), which has been identified as the most neglected area of criminal career research (Bushway, Thornberry and Krohn 2003). If the process of desistance and its maintenance can be understood, this can be used to inform interventions with offenders and to support those who have ceased offending so that crime free behaviour can be sustained. Early explanatory models have identified three broad factors associated with desistance: maturation (i.e. internal criminal propensity or population heterogeneity); social control (state dependence); and personal agency (subjective change). The findings from researchers who have examined these three explanatory models as individual and interactive entities will be critiqued within this review. It is proposed that an interactive perspective on desistance is required, where propensity, agency and structural factors are all seen to play a role for those who successfully desist from crime. The aim of this paper is to conduct a review to collate and integrate what is currently understood about the process of desistance. This can then be used to guide where future research needs to be directed and to inform where the focus of treatment should be placed. The greatest proportion of the literature has focused on delinquency and antisocial behaviour and consequently this will be the main, although not the sole, focus of the current literature review. The review will be organised as follows. Firstly explanations of desistance that focus on population heterogeneity will be examined followed by research that examines state dependence. An integrated approach, which combines these two explanations, will then be explored. Finally the importance of understanding subjective and internal change in the process of desistance.
will be examined. However, before the review, it is necessary to examine the issues that are associated with conceptualising, defining and measuring desistance, and so this will be presented first.

It is important to acknowledge the considerable difficulty that exists in operationalising and defining desistance, and there is great variation within the literature resulting in a lack of consensus on the matter. A key difficulty is the definition and assessment of an ‘absence’ of a behaviour and, in fact a ‘sustained’ absence (Maruna 2001). This ‘absence’ is problematic as it requires the measurement of something that no longer exists and furthermore, that is ‘absent’ over a period of time that has no clear end point. To further complicate the issue of definition, several conceptual questions remain unanswered: for example, whether desistance can occur after only one criminal act, and if this process or phenomenon is different from desistance following several acts of crime (Laub and Sampson 2001); and whether predictors of desistance are unique entities, or simply the opposite of risk factors that predict offending (Stouthamer-Loeber et al. 2004). Various definitions of desistance have been developed. It has been simplistically and arguably vaguely defined as ‘the termination of offending’ (Shover 1996); however, latterly it is more commonly acknowledged that desistance is not simply ‘termination’ or the point at which criminal activity has ceased, but the causal process that supports the termination of offending. Hence desistance is regarded as an evolving multifaceted process (e.g. Laub, Nagin and Sampson 1998, Maruna 2001, Maruna and Roy 2007) rather than a simple one-off ‘event’.

As this discussion demonstrates, the concept of desistance is complex and it has become necessary to differentiate between primary and secondary desistance. ‘Primary desistance’, which comprises of crime free gaps or apparent interludes that could simply be due to the successful evasion of arrest, should be distinguished from ‘real/secondary desistance’ that refers to the emergent non-offender identity and a complete end to offending (Gadd 2006, Maruna et al. 2004). Adding to this complexity are two methodological issues that impact on the generalisability of findings from research, and which must be considered when interpreting empirical findings. Firstly, variations in the length of follow up period need to be considered, as permanent desistance can only be determined retrospectively (Frazier 1976). Consequently, the adoption of short follow-up times e.g. 6 months (Brown and Ross 2010); 1 year (Maruna 2001, Warr 1998) may reflect primary desistance only rather than the true cessation of offending, i.e. secondary desistance. In addition, consideration should be paid to the nature of the data from which desistance is identified (official records vs. self report) and the inherent limitations
associated with such data. Official reports (e.g. police records or conviction records) only reflect the behaviour of those who have been caught and may over represent desistance (Smith 2002). Although self-reports do include offending behaviour that is not captured officially, they are open to social desirability bias, respondents concealing or exaggerating their offending, memory and telescoping problems, and those individuals who are still offending are more likely to refuse to participate (Soothill, Fitzpatrick and Francis 2009). Smith (2002) suggests that the most reliable record of offending behaviour is likely to result from a combination of official records and self-report data that also includes reports from teachers, parents and peers, although this is seldom done.

Despite these challenges, two major models have been developed to understand offending behaviour and account for desistance: the Propensity Model (e.g. Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990, 1996, Greenberg 1992, Rowe, Osgood and Nicewander 1990) and the Criminal Careers Model (e.g. Barnett, Blumstein and Farrington 1992, Blumstein, Cohen and Farrington 1988a, Blumstein, Cohen and Farrington 1988b). Propensity theorists tend to see no value in longitudinal work as they assume that individuals have an inclination, trait or tendency, also termed the process of population heterogeneity (e.g. self-control), to commit crime. Such theorists place great emphasis on the stability of this trait (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). This will be the first theoretical viewpoint considered and examined in this review. The criminal careers approach is an overarching framework that encompasses a variety of theoretical ideas (e.g. developmental criminology and life-course approach) that tend to concentrate on individual changes over time and specific processes such as persistence and desistance (Farrington 1997). This approach focuses on the development and change of behaviour across the life-course. Laub and Sampson (2003) have stringently tested this and based on longitudinal data, propose that an age-graded theory of informal social control is linked to the desistance process. It is suggested that childhood events and individual characteristics may encourage stability in offending, but that adult life events can alter criminal trajectories. This approach emphasises the importance of life events or life contingencies, i.e. that social control and social bonds are related to desistance, which has been labelled as the state dependence process. An analysis of the state dependence process will form the second part of this review.

It has been argued that subjective changes in offenders’ worlds must be examined alongside social and maturational explanations of desistance as this can provide a more complete picture of the reform process (Maruna 2001). Generally it has been suggested that criminal cognitions play an important role in the early stages of desistance, although their
long-term impact on behaviour remains under-researched and so is less certain (Healy 2010). Research into the role of agency reveals that it may not just be what offenders think but how they think that is an important factor in relation to desistance. Walters (1990) identified eight criminal thinking styles and proposed that individuals make choices as to whether or not they will offend and then alter their cognitions to support the ensuing lifestyle this choice results in. According to this view, desistance occurs because of a complex and dynamic interaction between subjective factors and social factors and this integration has been identified as central in the desistance process (e.g. Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph 2002, Maruna 2001). The role of agency or subjective factors will, therefore, form the final part of this review.

Population Heterogeneity

Research into desistance has emerged from an interest in the propensity of an individual to commit a criminal act (e.g. Ezell 2007, Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990, Piquero, Moffitt and Wright 2007, van der Geest, Blokland and Bijleveld 2009). This has also been referred to as a population heterogeneity process that suggests that enduring individual characteristics such as self-control, impulsivity and psychopathic personality dispose individuals to engage in crime throughout their lifetime (Nagin and Paternoster 2000). Population heterogeneity has been defined by Nagin and Paternoster (2000:119) as the correlation between prior and future criminal behaviours, which is attributed to differences in criminal propensity. Nagin & Paternoster (2000) suggest that there is heterogeneity within the population of a time-stable characteristic that affects the probability of anti-social behaviour in early life and then at subsequent points over time. Self-control, criminal propensity and criminality are all used to describe a similar concept of an internal predisposition to engage in criminal behaviour, although there is no consensus as to how the concept of propensity should be defined. Population heterogeneity as a factor in isolation perhaps has the least to say about the process of desistance and is arguably more aligned to persistence. However, this needs consideration and further exploration in order to investigate how researchers explain the juxtaposition of how desistance is in fact possible in the presence of a stable characteristic that is linked to offending, as this concept seems to be fundamentally contradictory. Perhaps what is being seen is the influence of protective factors that may reduce the likelihood of offending behaviours in the presence of risk. This is similar to the concept of individual resilience, which has been conceptualised as the combination of serious risk and positive outcome i.e. the capacity to do well despite of
adversity (Rutter 2007). However, Gottfredson and Hirshi (1990) claimed that criminals do not desist, rather, the likelihood of them committing crime diminishes over time. These theorists propose that the contradiction that criminality is stable over time, but that crime declines with age, is explained by changes in various factors that determine offending e.g. opportunity, activity - as well as propensity. It is therefore the ‘other’ factors that change as someone gets older, not the propensity. Again this may be aligned with the concept of protective factors that mitigate the risk of reoffending. Arguably this theory and particularly the emphasise on self-control has appeal in relation to certain aspects of criminal behaviour, such as early onset and persistence, as criminals do often seem to lack self-control (Pratt and Cullen 2000), although not necessarily in relation to all types of crime e.g. white collar crime and terrorism (Geis 2000). However, this approach is too simplistic and is not logical for all aspects of criminal behaviour. Whilst it is difficult to dispute that there is an association between low self-control and criminality, it is also challenging to provide robust evidence to suggest that low self-control plays a causal role in desistance. Although Gottfredson and Hirshi dismiss the idea that ‘maturation reform’ lies at the heart of desistance, they offer no alternative explanation as to how individuals control a ‘stable’ absence of self-control. Kaziman (2007) argues that there may be some relevance of self-control (particularly impulsiveness and risk seeking) to desistance, but in order to understand the process fully and in detail, a wide variety of variables need to be examined in the desistance process across different offending behaviours.

Research evidence is equivocal as to whether all criminal career dimensions share the same causes, as it has been found that some core variables are related to multiple dimensions and some variables exert a unique effect on some dimensions (e.g. Blumstein et al. 1986, Farrington and Hawkins 1991, Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990, Loeber et al. 1991). For example, Farrington and Hawkins (1991) found that onset, participation and persistence were predicted by different variables and persisters and desisters could be discriminated by certain variables (e.g. low paternal involvement, low commitment to education and low verbal IQ). Loeber et al. (1991) found that the correlates of initiation (e.g. attention deficit, withdrawal/shyness and depression) were distinct from escalation but positive and negative aspects of the same correlates were similar for initiation and desistance (e.g. social withdrawal and disruptive behaviour). This contradictory finding suggests that criminal propensity is inconsistent with the data but so to some extent is the claim that different theories are required for different career dimensions. This contradictory claim, that general criminal propensity is not supported yet, unique explanations may not be required for each
criminal career dimension, guided the research focus of Piquero, Moffitt, and Wright (2007). They used longitudinal data from 1,037 participants in the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Human Development Study, and examined whether self-control is linked in a similar manner across different criminal career dimensions (participation, frequency, persistence and desistance). If this was found to be the case, it would support the general theory of crime (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). Two measures of self-control were used, one collected during childhood and one during adolescence; the measures used fitted with Gottfredson and Hirschi’s specification of self-control and included measures of impulsivity, lack of persistence, high activity levels, risk-taking and antisocial behaviour (for measures see Wright et al. 1999). Consistent with Gottfredson and Hirschi’s theory, self-control was significantly related to the participation, frequency and persistence of a range of crime types (e.g. theft, vandalism, rape and aggravated burglary) and could distinguish persisters from desisters, with desisters evidencing higher self-control (Piquero, Moffitt and Wright 2007:83). In relation to participation, the analysis revealed that those with lower levels of self-control were more likely to be convicted of a criminal offence by the age of 26. There are two important implications of these findings: firstly general theories of crime are perhaps more pertinent to understanding criminal careers than explanations that examine unique variables across different dimensions, rendering specific theories relating to each dimension of criminal careers redundant (Piquero, Farrington and Blumstein 2007:76). Secondly, methodologically this challenges the need to use longitudinal data as cross-sectional analysis would be a suitable methodology in that it provides a snap shot of an offender at one-point in his/her career that is adequate to test these theoretical ideas and findings (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1986). This conclusion may be a little premature (although it should not be completely dismissed), as there are some further considerations that need to be explored within the data set used by Piquero, Moffitt and Wright (2007). The analysis only focused on a limited subset of criminal career dimensions (participation, frequency, persistence and desistance) and parameters e.g. official records of violent and non-violent crimes between the age of 13 and 26 (n = 167) as pre-age 13 data was not available. A large non-offending comparison group was used (n = 816) but this data again was based on official reports that may be incomplete without supporting self-report evidence. Other dimensions that were not examined included onset, duration, seriousness and escalation (Blumstein, Cohen and Farrington 1988b, Farrington 1997, Piquero, Farrington and Blumstein 2007). Additionally several parameters of criminal careers could have also been examined such as age of onset, prevalence of offending peaks, and versatility and diversification of offending (Piquero et al.
to see if the same correlation is found. This research did not control for other variables that have been identified as potential predictors of criminal career dimensions such as social bonds, and arguably this research is incomplete by neglecting these (Sampson and Laub 2003, Savolainen 2009). These associations need to be examined in order to strengthen the explanatory power of general theories of crime in explaining desistance.

Research on a high risk sample by van der Geest, Blokland and Bijleveld (2009) explored stable personality and background characteristics within sub-groups of offenders to see if personality factors can distinguish certain criminal career trajectories including desistance. Self-control was operationalised as impulsivity and thrill seeking, and other variables included intelligence, social skills, depression, neuroticism and psychopathology. Trajectory analysis identified 5 groups of offender (ALS: Adolescent Limited Serious; LB: Late Bloomer; LFD: Low Frequency Desisters; HFD: High Frequency Desisters; and HFC: High Frequency Chronic), and relating trajectories to psychological, behavioural and background characteristic revealed four distinct offender profiles. The high frequency groups (HFD and HFC) scored high on risk (e.g. severe psychopathy and ADHD, early onset), but they differed in their rates of desistance, as although it was found that for both groups serious offending declined with age, the HFC group continued to show nontrivial levels of serious crime in their late 20s and 30s. This divergence in these two trajectories could feasibly be explained by endogenous factors such as marriage and drug use, although this was not investigated.

The low frequency offenders (LFD and ALS) scored highly on the presence of protective factors (e.g. good conscious development - a variable determined on the basis of clinical judgement and pre-trial reports) but they also displayed some personality problems too (e.g. ADHD type hyperactive/impulsive). The LB group was most clearly set apart from the other groups and was characterised mostly by ADHD sub-type inattentive, combined psychopathology, poor social skills, high daring and low neuroticism. These high risk offenders were characterised by troubled backgrounds and problem behaviour but three quarters of them were low-rate offenders by 32 and those classified on desisting trajectories in the study did not continue serious offending beyond the age where it is found that most young men desist (Sampson and Laub 2005). Subgroups of offenders showed markedly different stable personality and background traits that suggests common personality factors in part can distinguish certain trajectories i.e. in relation to desistance. The research, however, examined the influence of stable characteristics or static risk factors and did not observe individuals’ interactions, behaviours and environments or dynamic factors that may be explanatory factors in the differences and divergences found in the trajectories. This
research has its strengths in being able to typify offender subgroups and identify sets of characteristics associated with each group through the use of canonical correlation analysis, which is relatively uncommon in this field. However, a limitation of this methodology is that it is difficult to conduct a statistical significance test (Levine 1977) and so the statistical analysis can only be used as an exploratory tool, rather than a confirmatory analysis tool. However, this research by using trajectory analysis to distinguish between developmental pathways is of theoretical value in relation to desistance by identifying profiles of desisters based on psychological and behavioural characteristics; this in turn can inform treatment so that it targets risks and promotes protective factors and in doing so intervenes in criminal careers.

In their General Theory of Crime (i.e. criminal propensity theory), Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) argued that the predictors of one criminal career parameter should be the same across all dimensions. However, the empirical evidence (e.g. Ayers et al. 1999, Farrington and Hawkins 1991, Loeber et al. 1991, Nagin and Smith 1990, Nagin and Farrington 1992, Paternoster and Triplett 1988, Paternoster 1989, Smith, Visher and Jarjoura 1991) suggests that some variables exert a unique effect on some dimensions, but not others, although a core set of variables are related to multiple dimensions. This is contrary to a general criminal propensity theory and suggests that different theories are required to understand different dimensions of criminal careers. Analysing this proposal is complex as the variables examined in relation to propensity vary greatly between studies, as do the dimensions considered making it very difficult to compare and contrast and generalise findings. Some findings draw disparate conclusions; for example, Nagin and Farrington (1992:518) utilised data from 411 males assembled in the Cambridge Study and found an inverse association between age of onset and persistence that was entirely attributable to persistent heterogeneity, which is that individual differences established early in life have an enduring impact on future criminality. This implies that it is not necessary to distinguish between the facets of a criminal career. However, analysing several variables (e.g. negative labelling, beliefs, age and offending history), Smith, Visher and Jarjoura (1991) found that the general propensity claim was inconsistent with their longitudinal data (n = 1605), and that although a core set of variables was associated with multiple dimensions, others related to specific dimensions only. Similarly, Loeber et al. (1991) found that initiation and escalation are distinct processes, but the variables associated with initiation (e.g. social withdrawal, disruptive behaviour, discipline, family and peer associations) were also associated with desistance, thereby reflecting the positive and negative aspect of a similar
process. This study analysed a vast array of variables (e.g. child characteristics, attitudes to antisocial behaviour, and family factors) but requires development to gain an understanding of the relative importance of particular variables. This could potentially explain the underlying mechanisms associated with the processes leading to persistence and desistance.

In summary the research on propensity theory seems to indicate that population heterogeneity and more specifically self-control can distinguish persisters from desisters, however, either the stability of propensity needs to be tested further or it must be accepted that these factors are only relevant as part of an integrated model that also includes social and subjective aspects. Regarding the stability of self-control, the extent of this stability is unclear (Arneklev, Cochran and Gainey 1998). There is evidence that suggests self-control is in fact malleable (Moffitt et al. 2011), particularly during the first 10 to 12 years of life, and that it may improve with age due to socialisation, indicating that it is not absolutely stable within a person (Hay and Forrest 2006, Mitchell and MacKenzie 2006, Winfree et al. 2006). An in-depth meta-analysis by Piquero, Jennings and Farrington (2010) that examined the malleability of self-control found that self-control improvement programmes (for up to age 10 to 12) did improve children’s/adolescents’ self-control and this reduced delinquency and problem behaviours. The authors have suggested that the effects of these programmes need to be examined over time, particularly in to late adolescence and early adulthood. Longitudinal studies that examine personality change have forced a reconsideration of the assumption that personality traits do not change in adulthood (Mroczek and Spiro III 2003, Roberts, Walton and Viechtbauer 2006, Srivastava et al. 2003). Roberts and Mroczek (2008) found that in terms of mean levels (i.e. gains and loses in a specific personality trait over a specified period of time and age, for a given population), increases in self-control are evident in young adulthood (age 20-40) and in middle age, which indicates that personality traits can change at any age. Although there is evidence that the traits of impulsiveness and risk-taking are relevant in relation to persistence and desistance (Kazemian 2007), this would be more convincing if there was clear empirical evidence that non-offending samples were shown to have more self control than both persisters and desisters and that opportunity to commit crime declines with age. Propensity theory arguably has appeal in that it is simplistic and it has been empirically demonstrated that criminals do lack self-control and do things without thinking. However research evidence arguably only demonstrates that there is an association between self-control and criminal behaviour, which is inherently different from suggesting that there is a general causative link for all offenders. Indeed critics have pointed out that this would be a questionable claim (Soothill, Fitzpatrick and Francis 2009).
Other aspects of this theoretical stance invite challenge and consideration. There are certain crimes that undermine this theory; for example, Simpson and Piquero (2002) found that in relation to white collar and corporate crime offenders demonstrated exceptionally high levels of self-control. In addition it has been argued that if criminal propensity is to be accepted, the predictors of one criminal career parameter should be the same across all parameters; yet this does not appear to be the case. Another consideration is that if, as the propensity theory proposes, offending behaviour is associated with stable traits, this would render rehabilitation efforts that target dynamic or criminogenic factors pointless. Furthermore if this were the case, there would be no empirical evidence to support the use of such intervention strategies. More information is required about the sources of propensity to crime that differentiate individuals, and the specific mechanisms related to the development of self-control (e.g. neurophysiological, family factors or biological deficiencies). In relation to desistance, more research is also needed to explain how, if there is stability in some of these traits, most individuals eventually desist. Research has generally focused on examining between group differences (i.e. desisters versus persisters) but little attention has been paid to understanding internal factors that promote desistance within individuals; an analysis that could assist the debate on stability and change and potentially provide useful information for the development of rehabilitative interventions. Research now needs to establish if self-control is related to desistance because of within individual change of a trait that is malleable. Finally consideration must also be paid to the influence of social factors or the ‘state dependence’ process in relation to desistance, which will be examined next.

State Dependence

Laub and Sampson (2001:48) explained that “individuals desist as a result of a combination of individual actions (choice) in conjuncture with situational contexts and structural influences linked to important institutions”, and suggested that desistance operates simultaneously at different levels (individual, situational and community), as well as across different contextual environments (family, work and military). The ‘knifing off’ (Elder 1998:966) of individuals from their current environment is observed, which creates a new script for them to follow in the future. It has been suggested that “knifing off is a central part of the desistance process” (Sampson and Laub 2003:145). This metaphor is used to suggest that individuals sever off/away from (with a metaphorical knife) disadvantage, stigma and negative factors. The usage of the term ‘knifing off’ is defined by Caspi and Moffitt (1993:251), who suggested that it involves social circumstances that “eliminate old options”, which is consistent with the theoretical framework of social control. Individuals’ new non-offending lives no longer have the features found in their offending past but positive opportunities such as employment and marriage.

Sampson and Laub (1990) theorised, in their age-graded theory of informal social control, that attachments to adult institutions (family, community, military and work) influence criminal behaviour over the life-course and are involved in the desistance process. They suggested that desistance is linked to factors that are associated with transitions into adulthood. It should be acknowledged that this was based on the Glueck men (longitudinal study of 1,000 Boston males, 500 delinquent 500 non-delinquent; Glueck and Glueck 1950) entering school in the 1940s, and late modernity is now very different e.g. key adult transitions (getting married and having children) are frequently delayed. It has been emphasised that the significant factor in desistance is the quality and strength of the ties not just their existence (Maume, Ousey and Beaver 2005, Sampson and Laub 1990). For example, Sampson and Laub (1993, 2003) found that the likelihood of desistance was positively associated with the strength of marital attachment and job stability. This was consistent over a range of outcome variables, different analytical techniques and after controlling for antisocial behaviour in childhood. The relevance of the strength of social bonds is emphasised further by Rhule-Louie and McMahon (2007) who demonstrated that problem behaviour could be an integral part of a romantic relationship, and that, based on empirical support for partner similarity and assortative mating (i.e. individuals selecting partners with similar traits and characteristics to themselves), the influence of a relationship on problem behaviour could be positive or negative, depending on the characteristics of the partners. In some cases marriage would not act as a deterrent and would not promote
desistance when the partner also displays problem behaviour that affects the quality of the relationship. Rhule-Louie and McMahon’s research was extended by Capaldi, Kim and Owen (2008) who examined the influence of romantic partners (suggesting restricting analysis to marriage fails to encapsulate a more contemporary viewpoint) in the context of a dynamic model. Their longitudinal data was from a community sample of 191 young men identified as at risk for delinquency, and their partners. Relationship stability was found to offer an informal social control mechanism similar to that found in the marriage effect (i.e. marriage promoting desistance), but the influence was dependent on the levels of problem behaviour in the females. The research by Rhule-Louie and McMahon (2007) and Capaldi, Kim and Owen (2008) support one of the key tenets offered by Sampson and Laub in relation to informal social control; that the influence of social-control is completely reliant on the quality of the social control mechanism that is in place.

Further support for the influence of the social bonds of marriage and employment on desistance is found when examining different cultures and populations e.g. Dutch and Finnish populations (Bersani, Nieuwbeerta and Laub 2009, Bersani, Laub and Nieuwbeerta 2009, Savolainen 2009), African and Latino American samples (Hughes 1998), high risk offenders (Stouthamer-Loeber et al. 2004) and female offenders (Edin and Kefalas 2005, Fleisher and Krienert 2004, Hunt, Joe-Laidler and MacKenzie 2005, Kreager, Matsueda and Erosheva 2010, Sommers, Baskin and Fagan 1994, Uggen and Kruttschnitt 1998). Evidence also exists for the role of religion as a form of social control, with religion offering psychological and emotional comfort for those looking to desist from crime, and aiding the transition to conventional life (Schroeder and Frana 2009). It is difficult to extrapolate from the research whether the mechanisms that relate to the association of marriage, employment and religion with desistance are implicit (i.e. indirect) or explicit (i.e. direct), are related to a personal choice or a cognitive process, and whether the process of desistance starts in anticipation of a transition e.g. one into marriage, or as a reaction to it. It could also be argued that as it is not possible to randomly assign individuals to a treatment condition (i.e. marriage), it is impossible to demonstrate the effect of ‘treatment’, which is problematic when attempting to establish the underlying mechanisms involved in the desistance process; although longitudinal data may provide some clarity regarding this issue.

Research has also examined the role of informal social control on female offenders’ desistance. Uggen and Kruttschnitt (1998:358) found that females were more likely than males to desist, and that although similar factors acted as a deterrent for males and females for self-reported desistance, they varied for official desistance (based on official reports). For
example for women, emotional attachments and the presence of children were related to official desistance. Support has been found for an association between motherhood, marriage and positive social networks and desistance (Edin and Kefalas 2005, Fleisher and Krienert 2004, Kreager, Matsueda and Erosheva 2010, Sommers, Baskin and Fagan 1994). Edin and Kefalas (2005), in a qualitative analysis of 162 poor single women from eight economically marginalised neighbourhoods in Philadelphia, documented a strong link between motherhood and criminal desistance. Women talked about how motherhood led to conformity and the abandonment of excessive drinking and drug use, and provided them with a purpose. A similar finding is acknowledged in a qualitative study by Hunt, Joe-Laidler and MacKenzie (2005) who interviewed 118 mothers who were self-identified gang members and found pregnancy and motherhood initiated lifestyle changes that reduced the time the females spent on the street and with gang friends and other risk behaviours including drinking and drug taking. Research on female desistance focuses on disadvantaged women and gang membership, which limits the generalisability of the research. In addition, further analysis is needed regarding the underlying mechanisms that associate motherhood and female desistance as several possible explanations have been offered e.g. shift in priorities, change in value placed on risk of arrest, or alteration in routine activities (Edin and Kefalas 2005).

Although research has provided some evidence of an association between social bonds (particularly marriage for males and parenthood for females) and desistance, the evidence remains equivocal. Some studies have suggested that marriage has no effect for males on desistance (Barry 2010, Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph 2002, Hirschi and Gottfredson 1983, Moloney et al. 2009, Ouimet and Le Blanc 1996), whereas others suggest that it has only a mediating or indirect influence, such as reducing time spent with delinquent peers (Maume, Ousey and Beaver 2005, Warr 1998), and that marriage and motherhood does not aid desistance in female offenders (Brown and Ross 2010, Giordano, Cernkovich and Holland 2003, King, Massoglia and Macmillan 2007, Leverentz 2006, Varriale 2008). Tittle (1988) suggested that marriage was not related to a reduction or termination of offending between adolescence and adulthood. Furthermore, Hirschi and Gottfredson (1983) argued that marriage was simply an artefact of the age-crime curve, i.e. with increased age, crime decreases and independently to this, as people get older, marriage increases. Recently Barry (2010) found that in a sample of 40 offenders (20 males and 20 females aged 18-33), the majority managed to stop offending even though they were neither in a stable relationship nor in employment, suggesting that offending ceased as a
reaction to adverse experience. Other research suggests that marriage is only relevant alongside other factors, or as an indirect influence on desistance. For example, Moloney et al. (2009) examined the association between fatherhood and desistance in relation to gang membership, using qualitative interview data from 91 gang members in the San Francisco Bay Area, and found that although fatherhood was an important turning point for many, it was heavily mediated by changes in peer relationships and social networks. Research has also found that whilst marriage suppresses offending in males, the influence for females is less robust (King, Massoglia and Macmillan 2007). Variale (2008) found no support for the causality of motherhood as a desistance mechanism for female gang members. Brown and Ross (2010), when examining 25 female offenders following release from incarceration, found that their male (ex)/partners did not aid desistance and were a source of risk and stress, and that other social bonds such as employment were limited and not in reach of these marginalised women. Leveretvz (2006) argued that the importance placed on the social bonds of marriage is very different for women, as women are less likely than men to form attachments to pro-social partners, often forming relationships with those who are antisocial. It also appeared from Brown and Ross’s (2010) study that marriage rates appeared to be low among the female offenders who were interviewed and active avoidance of romantic relationships was necessary for female offenders to actively desist. This finding, however, was based on a small sample of 25 women in a half-way house at the beginning of the desistance process, so would need longitudinal follow-up and a larger sample to improve the validity of the findings. Other research has suggested that there is limited evidence for the role of marriage in desistance in both males and females (Cernkovich and Giordano 2001, Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph 2002, Giordano, Cernkovich and Holland 2003).

Another issue that needs consideration when analysing data on social bonds and the desistance process is self-selection and sequencing, which has been examined by various researchers (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990, Laub and Sampson 2001, Laub and Sampson 2003, Moffitt 1993, Sampson and Laub 1993, Uggen 2000, Wright et al. 2001). Self-selection refers to the fact that life-events may not be coincidental but occur following a process of self-selection. As life-events or transitions are not randomly assigned to individuals, it is difficult to establish if such events are the causes or the correlates of desistance (Kazemian and Farrington 2010), which makes it difficult to establish if social bonds are antecedents of desistance. The development of social bonds, therefore, may be a process of self-selection reflecting an underlying criminal propensity. Moffitt (1993) found that life-course persistent
offenders (LCP) who displayed criminal propensity based on childhood temper had more erratic work-lives, had difficulty at work and did not display stability in their marriage with a high percentage getting divorced by the age of 40. Conversely for the adolescence-limited offenders (AL), delinquency personality disorders and cognitive deficits played no part in their offending, and so this group achieved better academic qualifications and adequate skills to forge close attachments with others. It is therefore suggested that reactions to transitional events such as marriage, employment or military service will vary depending on individuals’ antisocial histories; AL offenders can benefit from these social bonds as they offer the option to resume a conventional life-style but LCP offenders tend to select jobs and partners that support their antisocial lifestyle. A similar issue with self-selection has been identified by Evans et al. (1997) who found that the effects of the quality of relationships, marital status and occupational attainment were minimal when including a measure of self-control in their analysis. Therefore the relationship between self-control and social bonds was in the expected direction (Evans et al. 1997:493), i.e. those with low self-control have poor quality relationships with family and friends, low occupational attainment, poorer marriage prospects, and are more likely to have criminal associates. These findings suggest, therefore, that there are a number of factors that interact with social bonds in relation to desistance and the strength of the bond and the ease and ability to adopt these bonds is also likely to have an effect on desistance. This would imply that both traits and social influences offer a clearer understanding of the desistance process when combined, rather than when considered in isolation.

Some research indicates that informal social control is related to desistance from offending, and this is particularly seen in relation to marriage and employment; however this is dependent on the quality of these transitions not just their existence. Research findings are equivocal as some suggest that transitions (i.e. marriage and employment), have no effect on desistance or at best act only as a mediating influence. It is also unclear whether there is a relationship between propensity / stable traits and adult transitions and the extent to which social bonds may exist due to a process of self-selection. Sampson and Laub (1993) have attempted to untangle social bonds and self-control by controlling for individual propensity, and assessing the impact of life course events independently. They concluded that after controlling for individual differences and taking into account selection effects, marriage exerts an independent effect on desistance (Laub and Sampson 2001, Sampson and Laub 2005). However, whether transitions promote cognitive changes or cognitive changes promote the likelihood of a transition remains a contentious issue, and many
researchers have attempted to investigate the impact of cognitive processes and situational factors in a bid to determine the temporal sequencing involved. The following section, therefore, examines the literature that explores both population heterogeneity (namely self-control) and state dependence (social-control).

**Population Heterogeneity and State Dependence**

Several researchers have attempted to understand both self- and social control as complementary factors, revealing that these processes are often interdependent, happen simultaneously and that the associated variables and their integration are likely to differ across different aspects of the criminal career (e.g., Doherty 2006, Ezell 2007, Farrington and Hawkins 1991, Le Blanc 1993, Moffitt 1993, Morizot and Blanc 2007, Nagin and Paternoster 1994, Roisman, Aguilar, and Egeland 2004, Shover and Thompson 1992, Wright et al. 2001, Wright et al. 1999).

Moffitt (1993), in her research on the developmental taxonomy of antisocial behaviour, integrates the concepts of population heterogeneity and state dependence proposing two hypothetical prototypes: life-course persistent (LP) and adolescent-limited (AL) offenders. LP offenders’ anti-social behaviours originate from neurodevelopmental processes, (i.e. acquired or inherited neurophysiology) which are exacerbated by high risk social environments. Consequently, they are likely to have neurological problems, (e.g. cognitive or learning difficulties) that can be challenging when developing relationships and social skills, generating poor parental bonds, leading to antisocial behaviour and low self-control. So LP antisocial behaviour results from neuropsychological problems interacting with criminogenic environments. Conversely AL offenders’ anti-social behaviours have their origins in social processes beginning in adolescence and desisting in young adulthood. These delinquents do not have the same neurological deficits as LP offenders do, and they show little continuity in antisocial behaviours. Furthermore, change in delinquency is abrupt particularly during the periods of onset and desistance (Moffitt 1993). Moffitt suggests that transition events (e.g. marriage employment) can provide opportunities for both desistance and continuity; that is individuals’ reactions to state dependence processes will vary as a function of their antisocial history. This theory does not suggest that the LP pathway continues into old age, more that offending will continue well beyond the age when most desist. However it still remains unclear how LP delinquents eventually ‘age’ out of crime. Further research into midlife turning points is required through longitudinal studies that
follow both AL and LP delinquents, so that an examination of the long-term implications of individuals’ early experiences, criminal propensities and social influences can be considered.

Le Blanc (1993) examined self and social control in relation to the deceleration (i.e. the beginning of the process of termination) of criminal activity in conventional (stratified random sample of 458 adolescence) and delinquent adolescents (470 boys convicted by Montreal Juvenile court), using an analysis of concomitant change. For both conventional and delinquent adolescents a reduction in criminal activity was seen from mid to late adolescence, alongside a parallel improvement in self- and social-control, although the increase emerged later for the delinquents. However, although most studies agree on some key components of self-control e.g. impulsiveness and risk-seeking (e.g. Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990, Longshore et al. 2004, Sampson and Laub 1993), the study by LeBlanc (1993) did not include measures of impulsiveness and risk-seeking, and instead used the Jessnes Inventory (Jesness 1972) that includes some concepts not generally represented with the offending literature. The inventory of the study used quite a diverse group of variables to operationalise self-control including, autism, social anxiety, denial, antagonism, repression, alienation, and aggression. This scale has been criticised for the absence of validation data during the construction of the scale (Rohr 1997), and its reliability (estimated by test re-test) has been noted to be less than desirable (Putninš 1980). Furthermore, although the aim was to examine successive changes in individual state variables, the methodology employed by LeBlanc (concomitant change) cannot provide information about the temporal order (i.e. the arrangement of events over time) between the dependent and independent variables.

Doherty (2006) combined the Glueck’s data (Glueck and Glueck 1950) with follow up data from Laub and Sampson (2003) to examine self and social control within the life course interdependence hypothesis (Wright et al. 2001). She found that both were strong predictors of desistance (i.e. high self-control and high social integration is related to desistance), but that social bonds predicted desistance independently of self-control. This supports claims by Sampson and Laub (1993) that attachments formed in later life (e.g. employment and marriage) can divert criminal pathways and life trajectories; a claim that would be refuted by supporters of the criminal propensity model (e.g. Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). This suggests that both propensity and social bonds need to be examined to understand desistance. However, Doherty (2006) measured social integration (as a proxy for social bonds) using marriage, military service and employment, and did not attempt to determine the quality of these social bonds, focusing instead on their presence and duration. Consequently, the study does not assess the underlying causal mechanisms that
are responsible for desistance. Further examination of the presence, duration and quality of these and other life events (e.g. deviant peer relationships, parenting) is needed across different trajectories, including a comparison with individuals who have not experienced any of these life-events and those who have experienced several, as this could examine further how propensity and social bonds are integrated and the relative importance of these factors for criminal desistance.

Nagin and Paternoster (2000) proposed that criminal propensity (population heterogeneity) and social-control (state dependence) are two deeply embedded processes and therefore both need to be considered to gain a complete picture of desistance. The authors concluded that individual differences in propensity are more important than has been previously believed and that experiences in individuals’ lives that occur after the formation of different propensities have important consequences for criminal offending and desistance. Therefore it is also important to reiterate that even among those who initially display high criminal propensity, certain events or experiences can result in both primary and secondary desistance. This arguably provides verification that a mixed model of offending and desistance is required (Nagin and Paternoster 2000:132). Morizot and Le Blanc (2007) also incorporated maturation (self-control) and social-control approaches but examined 470 high risk adjudicated delinquents and tested two models: the launch effect model (long-term predictions about desistance) and the contemporaneous model (predictors assessed at the same time as offending i.e. short-term). Although differences in involvement in criminal activity were found in adolescence, almost all high-risk individuals desisted from crime by age 41, even those displaying low self-control. The launch effect model indicated that very few of the self- and social-control variables had the ability to make predictions of criminal trajectory (including desistance) based on their early measures, which is contrary to the propensity hypothesis. Only previous deviant behaviours (offending onset and substance abuse) were strong predictors of desistance in the launch effect model. When the significance of certain variables was examined further, Morizot and Le Blanc (2007) found that disinhibition and substance abuse played a significant role in the contemporaneous model (with substance abuse also being significant in the launch model). In addition, in the contemporaneous model, high levels of disinhibition were concurrently associated with a reduction in desistance, which is somewhat consistent with the propensity model (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990), in that low self-control (operationalised as lack of disinhibition) hinders desistance (or predict persistence), indicative of the significant role of stable traits in the normative process of desistance. How these personality traits manifest
themselves and interact with other factors to make them significant phenomena in relation to desistance needs further consideration. The study by Morizot and Le Blanc (2007) found a moderate effect of social-control but only at specific developmental points e.g. employment stability is only significant at emerging adulthood. Support for the maturation or self-control approach was found but overall the authors proposed that desistance is better studied by investigating self- and social-control simultaneously to investigate the complexity that surrounds criminal behaviour. These conclusions, however, were based on a relatively small longitudinal sample of 470 males at age 15, (age 23 n =219; age 31 n = 246; age 41 n = 160), over 4 time periods separated by long time lags (e.g. 8 years), and it may be difficult to record accurately and develop a trajectory that encapsulates all the relevant factors and significant events over long time frames, which if done would offer a better understanding of these issues. The sample comprised French-Canadian adjudicated (high risk) individuals, which limits the generalisability of the findings to this population. Within this research the conceptualisation of self-control was based on negative emotionality, extraversion and disinhibition; yet other well documented traits, such as openness to experience and conscientiousness were not included (McCrae and Costa 1987).

Utilising data from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Behaviour (411 working-class males in London) and the Montreal Two Samples Study (470 adjudicated French-Canadian males), Kazemian, Farrington and Le Blanc (2009) addressed the question of whether measures of social bonds and cognitive predispositions in late adolescence could predict subsequent changes in offending behaviour in mid-adulthood. What adds strength to this analysis is the comparison of within-individual change (which controls for criminal propensity and past offending and thus minimises self-selection bias) and between-individual change at 32. Cognitive predisposition was operationalised and measured using 2 dimensions; low self-control (which included 3 subscales: thrill seeking, impulsivity and aggressiveness) and techniques of neutralisation (which refers to the ability of offenders to adopt the victim’s stance and attribute blame externally and provide justification for their offending behaviour and was measured by an 11 item scale). Measures of social bonds included relationship with parents, employment, and delinquency of peers. Some behavioural measures were also used and incorporated past convictions and substance use. It was found that long-term predictions about individual offending patterns were unreliable as measures of cognitive predispositions and social bonds at 17-18 were weak predictors of changes in offending behaviour at 32. When comparing within-individual differences (change in offending gravity between ages 17-18 and 32) and between individual differences
(differences in gravity score at 32), long-term predictions seemed to be more accurate with the between-group analysis in which low-self control was a significant predictor of offending gravity. However, improvements in cognitive predisposition and social bonds (substance use and association with delinquent peers) were significant correlates of changes in offending gravity, both for self-reported and officially recorded offending. This implies that cognitive predisposition (self-control) is not a stable trait and emphasises the link between substance use and desistance. The findings suggest that little confidence can be placed in the reliability and robustness of long-term predictions of within-individual change, but that it is likely that the interaction between social bonds and cognitive predisposition (self-control) can predict offending patterns in the short-term. This requires further investigation because the dataset only used two data points, and consequently provides little information regarding whether such changes are gradual or abrupt. Nor does it illuminate the temporal order of the changes in offending patterns, social bonds and cognitive predisposition.

An examination by Gunnison and Mazerolle (2007) of indicators of social control (marriage, employment and religion) and an attitudinal measure of antisocial disposition (or propensity) using data from the first seven waves of The National Youth Survey ($n = 1224$; Elliott, Huizinga and Ageton 1985), revealed data that were congruent with the previous literature; desisters were distinguished from persisters by several risk factors including delinquent disposition, delinquent peer association, stable marriage, perceived certainty of marriage and drug and alcohol use. This research extended the body of knowledge by examining if there were any differences in the risk factors that distinguished the desisters from general delinquency from those who desisted from more serious delinquency. Although, as anticipated, desisters from general delinquency were less likely to have negative relations and possessed higher perceptions of punishment (i.e. perceptions for severity of punishment for a variety of crimes) than persisters, findings were partly counterintuitive in that desisters from serious delinquency were less likely to be employed and had lower perceptions of certainty of punishment. This surprising finding was explained by the authors who suggested that potentially employment could lead to an association with delinquent co-workers that may encourage persistence, and that this is avoided by the serious delinquents, who were generally found to be unemployed. This conclusion regarding employment, however, was speculative and was not based on any empirical data. This research indicates that as well as understanding psychosocial factors associated with desistance, these factors need to be compared and analysed empirically across different
levels of severity of offending and therefore types of offending to understand the process of desistance from criminality.

In conclusion, several studies have incorporated both self-control and social-control in an attempt to fully understand the process of desistance. There certainly seems to be support that individuals develop an underlying propensity that is related to criminal activity in adulthood. This then may affect social bond formation in later life, but social bonds are not completely determined by propensity, as they appear to have an independent relationship with offending behaviour and desistance (Wright et al. 1999). It seems, however, that it is difficult to make long-term predictions about desistance. When examining desistance, placing emphasis solely on self-control or solely on social control is too simplistic but integrating these two processes shows more promise. It is evident that we still do not fully understand the complexities of these two critical processes and particularly the explicit causal processes behind desistance, how these opportunities for desistance arise and if these opportunities need to be created by the individuals who are attempting to desist. It has also been suggested there is a requirement to reconceptualise traditional measures of self- and social-control; that is, move away from traditional definitions of self-control (impulsivity and risk taking) and include other cognitive processes and thinking styles e.g. concrete thinking, and adapt social bonds to reflect changing societal norms and values (Kazemian 2007). Furthermore, the role of the individual is missing from both the maturation process and social explanations of desistance. The final section of this review, therefore, examines the research on subjective changes and the role of agency in the desistance process.

Subjective and Internal Change

The role of the individual in the process of desistance remains poorly defined and under-researched (Healy 2010). The role of human agency in the decision making process has been identified as important for investigation (e.g. Maruna 2001), so issues with self-selection are addressed, as it has been identified that individuals have to be personally active in order to pursue social bonds (O’Connell et al. 2007). There is a collection of studies that suggests that desistance is the outcome of a complex interaction between subjective/agency factors and social/environmental factors (Bottoms et al. 2004, Farrall and Bowling 1999, Farrall 2005, Gadd 2006, LeBel et al. 2008, Maruna 2001, Maruna 2004, Maruna et al. 2004, Paternoster and Bushway 2009, Serin and Lloyd 2009, Vaughan 2007). Within this research, emphasis is placed on the ‘cognitive transformations’ and change of
identity that occur for offenders in the process of desistance (Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph 2002, Maruna 2001, Paternoster and Bushway 2009).

Shover (1983:208) proposed, based on interviews with 36 men who had been convicted and incarcerated for property crimes, that as men got older they took stock of their lives and made an identity shift, suggesting that desistance from crime is partly a result of changes in “identity, self-concept and the framework employed to judge oneself and others”. This is consistent with other predominantly qualitative research on the actual lived experiences of those who have desisted (e.g. Adler 1993, Graham and Bowling 1996, Hughes 1998). Maruna (2001) studied the phenomenological aspect of desistance and interviewed 55 men and 10 women, and analysed data from 30 individuals classified as desisters (operationalised as reporting over a year of crime free behaviour) and 20 classified as persisters (15 were not included in the analysis as they did not meet the criteria for persisters or desisters). This research involved a systematic comparison between the self-narratives of desisting ex-offenders and a matched sample of active offenders. Findings revealed that offenders who desist follow a process of “willful, cognitive distortions” in order to “make good” (Maruna 2001:9). Using content analysis to examine the different ‘mindsets’ displayed by 20 career criminals, Maruna argued that to successfully desist from crime offenders need to make sense of their past lives in specific ways and develop ‘redemption scripts,’ i.e. where offenders reinterpret their negative pasts that provides an opportunity to create a new identity and authentic way of living. Ex-offenders used cognitive strategies that allowed them to put their criminal pasts behind them and build new, positive futures; persistent offenders conversely lived by ‘condemnation scripts’ and were uncertain about their ability to change (Maruna 2001). This evidence suggests that long-term desistance is accompanied by identifiable and measurable changes of personal identity or the ‘me’ of an individual (Maruna 2001). This proposal is evidenced elsewhere in the literature (Farrall 2005, Gadd and Farrall 2004, Gadd 2006, Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph 2002, Maruna 2004, Maruna et al. 2004, Shover 1996) where offenders’ cognitions are examined.

Introducing a theoretical counterpart to Sampson and Laub’s (1993) theory of informal social control, Giordano and her colleagues (Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph 2002, Giordano, Cernkovich and Holland 2003) developed an interactionist perspective on desistance, and proposed a ‘theory of cognitive transformation’ that centres on cognitive shifts that are an integral and frequent part of the desistance process. Their view is strongly related to attitudinal change and recognises the importance of the role of agency in
understanding this change process. These researchers proposed that there are 4 types of
cognitive transformation: (i) openness to change; (ii) exposure to hooks for change (e.g.
prison, religion, children); (iii) envisioning a ‘replacement self’; and (iv) transformation in the
way an actor views deviant lifestyle. In this research, the desistance process was analysed
from a gendered perspective with the main focus being on females, but it was found that
the stories of change were from similar discourses for both males and females. Extending
this research, Giordano, Cernkovich and Holland (2003) observed that marriage can reduce
peer contacts and that peers may be associated with the onset and persistence of
criminality, but without a strong motivation to change and commitment to the development
of a new identity, the actor may ignore spousal influence or indeed just leave the
relationship. These findings are all underpinned by an emphasis on the important role of
cognitive processes in behavioural change.

More recently Paternoster and Bushway (2009) have built on the work of Giordano
and her colleagues in 2002, and expanded Maruna’s view that desistance involves a
deliberate act of self-change. The authors suggest that desistance requires a fundamental
and intentional change in how a person views himself/herself. However unlike Maruna’s
theory that individuals change the interpretation of their criminal pasts, Paternoster and
Buhway (2009) introduce the identity theory of desistance; offenders cast off their own
identity in favour of a new one. They suggest that offenders have a ‘feared self’, which is
what they might become if they continue offending, that they are motivated away from; and
a ‘possible self,’ which is a positive future self that they are motivated towards. These
authors suggest that it is the feared self that provides motivation to begin the break from
offending. This theory is an attempt to understand the integration of subjective change that
brings about the change in propensity to commit crime that is linked to a change in
preferences (e.g. move away from drug use) and changes in social networks. The emphasis,
therefore, is placed on human agency creating change that is the ‘upfront work’ that is
needed to start the process of desistance (Paternoster and Bushway 2009:1107). It is then
this social change that becomes critically important for maintenance of desistance: an
individual undergoes a change in his/her self and this new identity leads him/her to change
his/her life through social change (e.g. jobs and marriage). These social changes the authors
refer to as structural breaks. Paternoster and Bushway (2009) suggest that every offender
must go through this identity change because without this part of the process happening
structural support is unlikely to be achieved. However, it is difficult to provide empirical
support for this theory because it is hard to measure identity shifts in individuals and to then
connect those backwards to incidents that motivated these changes, or forwards to changes in social networks and preferences. The authors propose the use of time series analysis to investigate whether individuals follow non-stationary time series with evidence of structural breaks. Whilst the authors examine how this may be done in theory, curiously they do not actually report this analysis, instead concluding that evidence of non stationary time series characterised by structural breaks would be ‘friendly’ with an identity theory of desistance (Paternoster and Bushway 2009:1156). This needs to be directly investigated in order to determine the validity of this assumption. In addition, as identified by the authors themselves, this needs to be done alongside conventional methods that involve interviewing ex-offenders and asking about any noticeable changes in identities, preferences and social networks that they believe are linked to their desistance processes. By doing this exploratory work, the processes that facilitate changes in behaviour and lead to desistance can be identified, based on actual lived experiences. Following this the validity and generalisability of findings can be tested through replication studies.

Researchers have also taken a case-study approach to analyse the internalised sense of self of individuals and the subjective nature of desistance. The findings suggest that an integrated theory of desistance is required that focuses on both the aspects of structure and agency (Farrall and Bowling 1999, Farrall 2005, Gadd and Farrall 2004, Gadd 2006). Farrall (2005) examined desistance and introduced insights from an existential perspective where a core belief is the understanding of feelings and emotions. Based on a case study of a female offender, ‘Sandra’ (found guilty of theft from employee related to a cannabis habit), the desistance process involved a new way of being ‘Sandra’, which was an active process that involved a continuous process of self-exploration to look for both ‘who’ she was and importantly a way of being that person (Farrall 2005:382). It was observed that external factors (employment) assisted with this transformation, particularly the maintenance of this new identity. Analysing the case study of ‘Frank’, a former far-right activist, Gadd (2006), suggested that in the study of desistance there is a need to differentiate ‘identity’ from ‘personal identity’ i.e. the critical difference between an individual’s social presentation of the self (identity) and the private internalised sense of self (personal identity). Gadd argued that it is the internalised process of personal identity (i.e. mental processes that mean we equate ourselves to qualities that we perceive in others) that is more important than ‘identity’ when looking to assess and make sense of changes in offenders’ lives. The case study approach offers in-depth and rich data sets but they are based on very specific offending patterns (i.e. ‘Sandra’ stealing from employees and ‘Frank’ involved in racist hate-
crimes). These case studies focused on very specific types of crime and are reliant on active participants who willingly reflect and discuss their experiences. It may therefore be that such subjective changes apply only to certain offending behaviour and to certain individuals i.e. those who can acknowledge and accept their criminal past and are able to reflect over the past. This would suggest more empirical data (qualitative and qualitative) is required across wider groups of offenders in order to see if the findings are generalisable to a wide range of offenders.

Research on subjective change and desistance has also attempted to understand the interaction between agency and environmental factors (e.g. Bottoms et al. 2004, LeBel et al. 2008, Serin and Lloyd 2009, Vaughan 2007). Bottoms et al. (2004) present an interactive framework involving programmed potential (risk factors or innate characteristics such as age), social context (structures, cultures, and situations) and agency. It is stressed that focussing on any of these factors in isolation will fail to provide a full and comprehensive understanding of desistance. LeBel et al. (2008) have also supported a ‘subjective-social model.’ They suggest there are 3 possible models: a strong subjective model (based on mindset, willpower and motivation); a strong social model (social circumstances matter the most and are out of the individual’s control); and subjective social models (both subjective and social events have an impact either independently or indirectly through an interaction). They tried to empirically disentangle these three models by analysing Home Office data from The Oxford University Dynamics of Recidivism Study (Burnett 2004). Data collection involved multiple interviews with 130 male repeat offenders. Operationalisation of desistance was stringent (a 10 year follow up period using reconviction data) and the independent variables used to explore subjective mindset included hope/self-efficacy, regret and shame, internalising stigma, alternative identities and social problems. In addition, a control was put in place for time stable differences and selection effects. The results led the authors to rule out the strong subjective and strong social models but to support the subjective-social model, where subjective and social factors had independent effects. This indicates that social problems do not happen randomly but are caused/exacerbated by the subjective states of offenders. However, the problem still remains regarding the sequencing of cognitive and external influences because as identified earlier they operate through a dynamic interactive process and therefore occur simultaneously (Le Blanc 1993) and cyclically (Bottoms et al. 2004). The research did encapsulate that the belief in self-efficacy (termed as hope) was associated with desistance, as this appeared to promote the ability to take advantage of positive social opportunity as well as deal with setbacks as they arose. The
findings were, however, based on a relatively small-specialised sample (126 male property offenders), subjective conditions could not be examined simultaneously, and control variables were limited as the sample size restricted the ability to add more control variables such as unobserved heterogeneity. The authors conclude that further robust research is required to attempt to disentangle subject and situational changes in relation to desistance.

Various subjective explanations of desistance have been proposed but the individual’s role in the desistance process remains under-theorised (Healy 2010). Many offenders have suggested that their successful desistance was the result of subjective changes including shifts in identities, re-evaluation following negative experiences or feelings of shame due to their criminal behaviours. What is important is the focus on the cognitive transformations that offenders experience. Overall it could be argued that criminals’ cognitions and subjective changes play an important part in the early stages of desistance, particularly acting as catalysts for behaviour changes. However, the long-term impact and the relevance of these subjective changes to the maintenance of desistance, particularly as this is an ongoing process rather than simply the termination of offending remains unclear. Teaching offenders cognitive skills does not necessarily have long-term impacts on recidivism; this has significant short-term effects but does not seem to reduce offending in the long-term (see Merrington and Stanley 2004). This inability to achieve long term desistance by addressing subjective change is further supported by the findings that following programmes that address cognitive change, the impact of treatment disappears when controlling for risk factors (Taylor 2000), or following a period of 2 years (Raynor and Vanstone 1997). This would therefore suggest that paying attention to only cognitive and subjective experiences associated with desistance might be insufficient when attempting to understand permanent behaviour change.

Discussion

Having examined the literature on desistance and general offending behaviour, which particularly focused on population heterogeneity, state dependence and subjective factors, it is apparent that understanding and disentangling the factors associated with desistance is a complex task. The literature studied suggests that desistance needs to be considered as a process and the life-course perspective presented by Laub and Sampson (2001) provides a robust framework to aid understanding of the desistance process. Research to date endorses an interactive perspective, as desistance is a fluid, complex and dynamic process where the interaction between individual factors, cognitive processes and
social influences must be considered. It is possible that certain factors may be more prominent at different stages of the desistance process. For example, Healy (2010), in her empirically based model of desistance, suggests that criminal cognitions are prominent at the early stages of change particularly in relation to primary desistance; yet, individual or static factors are influential during both primary and secondary desistance but are not related to reconviction. In addition, she proposed that social factors played only minor roles in primary and secondary desistance but become salient over time (Healy 2010:169). The role of agency throughout this process also needs careful consideration. Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph (2002) suggested that agency is the primary factor in desistance, as desistance is an active process based on individual motivation to change and recognition of opportunities to change. Similarly Paternoster and Bushway (2009) emphasised the fundamental change in the self, or change of identity that is required ‘up front’ that then results in an individual changing his/her course of life, which is then followed and maintained by structural factors.

Consideration must also be given to turning points related to desistance or shifts that redirect a process (Abbott 1997), but these again need to be understood within the context of other structural processes such as race, ethnicity and social class. This raises the question of whether different theories are required for subpopulations reflecting age, ethnicity and gender. Based on the importance placed on understanding desistance within the context of structural processes this line of enquiry would seem a necessary theoretical development. The relevance of subpopulations has been examined in relation to a vast amount of psychological and criminological subject matters and now needs to be extended to include the life-course and the desistance process. In order to become ex-offenders individuals need to work hard at the processes but we should be encouraged by the fact that many achieve such successes (see Farrington et al. 2006). Gaining more empirical evidence that further aids our understanding of the desistance process will provide clear guidance on what is required in treatment and intervention programmes, in order to assist individuals in creating offending-free lifestyles. Research needs, therefore, to examine the point of termination of offending as well as the mechanisms that are evident while individuals are in the processes of desisting, which suggests a focus on both dynamic and static factors is required.

There remain many anomalies in the literature on desistance that raise unanswered questions that now need to be fully addressed. More attention is required regarding the conceptualisation, measurement and definition of desistance. There are several
considerations that are critical when defining and measuring desistance. For example, there is the need to distinguish between desistance as an end state versus desistance as a process (Laub and Sampson 2001). Furthermore, a consensus needs to be reached regarding what is the best criteria to judge whether desistance has occurred (i.e. complete termination, or reduction in severity and frequency), if this should be captured through official or self-report data (although arguably an integration of the two would offer a more complete picture) and the length of follow-up periods that are required. It could be argued that different research questions may require different stances in relation to these factors, although research needs to be transparent on any decisions made in relation to these issues. Currently, the observed variations in how these factors have been operationalised within studies contribute directly to the lack of clarity concerning the causes and correlates of desistance. Based on all these difficulties perhaps the time has now come to reserve the usage of the term ‘desistance’ to research based only on criminal career data that examines behaviour across the whole lifespan, and which ultimately requires data to be collected until the individual is deceased. The authors suggest that a more useful conceptualisation is that of the suspension of offending behaviour. Suspension can be observed at different points in time; as can the triggers that lead to the suspension of offending behaviour and the mechanisms that maintain this suspension over 1, 2, 3, 10, 20 etc. years. Comparisons can then be made (cross-sectionally and longitudinally) to see if different processes are responsible at the start of the suspension process or over time as this suspension is maintained. This term is more indicative of the fact that the process involved is not static but dynamic and until that end of life data is gathered retrospectively no guarantee can be made that this process/change of behaviour is permanent. In relation to measurement, suspension is clearly an on-going process that does not have a finite end so researchers can identify what part or point in time of the suspension process they wish to examine and do so within a sample that fits their chosen parameters. Comparisons can then be made across different points in time. In relation to the measurements of this process, this does not resolve the issue regarding reliability of recording of offences, but this can largely be addressed with the collection and integration of official, self-report and other (parents, teachers etc.) report data.

Due to the heterogeneity of offenders, desistance research needs more focus on within-individual changes, as it is difficult to establish clear differences between groups such as desisters and persisters (Kazemian 2007, Laub and Sampson 2001, Mulvey et al. 2004); therefore, individual trajectories need to be examined. In longitudinal studies, individuals can be used as their own controls and changes in cognitive, social and subjective factors can
be examined in relation to desistance. This means that the debate on stability and change can be examined (i.e. propensity), as well as social factors and the role of agency within the process. It has been argued by Kazemian (2007) that such a focus on within-individual change might provide an opportunity to monitor individuals and therefore provide information on crucial periods in the desistance process where specific support may be required. The heterogeneity of offenders also raises another issue that requires consideration: the process of desistance and the factors associated with it are likely to be different depending on the type of offending behaviour that is being examined. This would suggest that comparisons across different types of offending behaviours are also required in order to achieve a full and complete understanding of desistance.

Conclusion

Desistance research has developed greatly, although as identified many important questions remain unexplored. It has been suggested by Kazemian (2007:22) that increased communication is required by researchers in order to gain a consensus regarding the analysis of desistance in order that empirical generalisations can be drawn. It has been proposed that there is a lack of long-term studies (Laub and Sampson 2001), and more contemporary longitudinal data in needed that includes shorter time periods between each collection data point. However, such research would need to rectify some of the limitations found in existing longitudinal data (see Blokland 2005). For example, most studies investigated only a limited period of the lifespan, failed to control for ‘false’ desistance (i.e. incarceration, deteriorating health and death), and found that attrition was problematic reducing the sample size available for analysis. However there is also a need for further cross-sectional analysis, as a more accessible alternative methodology to gain a ‘snap-shot’ of the risk/promotive factors associated with the desistance process. Regardless of whether data is collected longitudinally or cross-sectionally, it has been argued that an integration of quantitative and qualitative research into desistance is required (Laub and Sampson 2003, Piquero, Farrington and Blumstein 2003) as it will ‘challenge and inform’ research on desistance (Laub and Sampson 2003:277). It could be argued that qualitative research on desistance can identify questions and the key foci required for desistance research and that quantitative measures can look to support the robustness of these proposals and test the generalisability of them across different samples and different offences.


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