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Understanding Desistance from Sexual Offending: 
A Thematic Review of Research Findings

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Abstract
Although there is a substantial body of work on desistance from crime in general, comparatively little is known about desistance from sexual crime. The broad aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the research methodology and preliminary findings from a recent empirical study on desistance from sexual offending conducted by the authors. Such findings have potentially important implications for policy and practice concerning sex offender risk assessment, treatment and management.

Key Words
Sex offenders, desistance, methodology, research findings

Background
The study of desistance from crime has occupied the minds of criminologists for decades (see e.g. Maruna, 2001; Laub and Sampson, 2003) and increasingly has become a key concept in probation policy and practice (see e.g., McNeill, 2006). So it should. If we are interested in assisting people to live crime free lives then of course we should be
interested in learning from those persistent offenders who have managed to put lives of crime behind them. From this we may be able to determine ways to work with people to move forward from the point at which they desist. Yet despite this seemingly fruitful source of knowledge, with potential for development of new interventions for offenders, researchers have until recently showed little interest in investigating the reasons people desist from sexual crime (Laws and Ward, 2011). In contrast, there is an increasing body of criminological research aimed at understanding the reasons persistent non-sexual offenders eventually ‘give up’, desist, or mature out of their criminal lifestyle (see further below).

The broad aim of this study, therefore, was to develop theoretical and empirical understanding of desistance from sexual offending. In this article we briefly describe the initial findings and outline the themes that have emerged from the data thus far. We will begin by outlining some of the findings of research into desistance from general, non-sexual, crime, before discussing existing research on desistance from sexual crime. We will then describe the methodology for the current research, including sampling methods and some of the ethical issues raised by undertaking sensitive research of this nature. Finally, the article seeks to put forward some tentative suggestions about the relevance of the findings for policy and practice.

*Desistance from Non-Sexual Crime*

There is a broad literature on research from non-sexual crime. This has tended to point to two complementary sets of explanations as to why people desist from crime (Bottoms et al, 2004). The first is based around the idea that people desist because of the action of informal social controls, that is, controls that are not part of the correctional apparatus of the state. This might include, for example, relationships with intimate partners, employment, military service (Sampson and Laub, 1993), and social contexts in which people live (Farrall, 2002). The second is around changes in the way actors think about themselves and their lives, so called ‘cognitive transformations’ (e.g. Maruna, 2001; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009; Healy, 2010; Bottoms and Shapland, 2011).
Despite this apparent polarisation in the research findings, many criminologists would argue that a combination of both of these factors apply for most people who change their criminal behaviour, that is, they require *structure* and *agency* (Bottoms et al., 2004; LeBel et al., 2008). Desistance seems to require changes in an offender’s personal circumstances, *and* in their thoughts, desires and life plans (although of course one might lead to another). Research is currently unpacking the chronology and relative strength of these different factors in accounting for desistance, recognising that every individual life is different.

There is no longer any debate in the field, however, that criminality is a pattern of behaviour from which most individuals eventually desist. For non-sexual offenders this is illustrated by the ‘age/crime curve’ (e.g. Farrington, 1986; Sampson and Laub, 2003), which broadly demonstrates that crime is mainly committed by people in their teens and twenties, after which offending rates decrease with age.

*Desistance from Sexual Offending*

A similar phenomenon appears to be the case for sexual offenders as well, despite widespread beliefs about the nature of sexual offending. Although the age-sex crime curve peaks later and tails off less dramatically than the age-crime curve for non-sexual crime, sex offending also decreases with age, contradicting the perception that sex offenders’ risk levels are high, stable, and linear (Lussier et al., 2010). Indeed, numerous studies now show that recidivism rates amongst sexual offenders are low (e.g. Kruttschnitt et al., 2000; Harris and Hanson, 2004; Thornton, 2007; Barnett et al., 2010), in fact lower than recidivism rates for other forms of non-sexual crime. Most people who have committed sexual offences, therefore, appear to desist from further sexual offending.

Despite this consistent finding in the literature, there has been little published research into how and why people desist from sexual crime. Kruttschnitt et al (2000) conducted a retrospective study of 556 sexual offenders, looking at whether informal social controls, specifically employment and marriage, predicted desistance, and whether such bonds are conditioned by formal social controls such as probation and treatment. They found that job stability significantly reduced the probability of re-offending, but marital status had no
significant effect. Since this study was limited to testing out some of the findings of Sampson and Laub’s earlier work (e.g. Sampson and Laub, 1993), the findings were limited by the measures used – in this case job and marital stability – and did not explore cognitive factors.

More recently, Harris (2014) conducted a qualitative investigation into desistance amongst a group of 21 sexual offenders deemed to be desisting from crime. Harris found evidence that a small number (n=3) had simply aged out of crime, a process she referred to as ‘natural desistance.’ This group of individuals had considerable criminal histories, including sexual offending and other types of offending. The biggest group of desisting offenders (n=18), however, attributed their desistance to cognitive transformations, or changes in thinking. Harris reports a continuum of cognitive transformations, ranging from a simple recognition that the offender had caused harm, through to a full creation of a new, non-offending identity, combined in some cases with a desire to assist others to avoid crime.

**Methodology**

In our own research, we have sought to explore both the structural and the cognitive changes associated with desistance from sexual offending against children. For the purposes of this research, this is defined as those who have at least one conviction for sexual offences against children. The sample group is described in more detail below; it includes offences ranging from rape and indecent assault of minors to indecent exposure and engaging in sexual activity in the presence of a child. Individuals convicted of sexual assaults with adult victims were not included in the research as the literature considers these two types of sexual offending to be qualitatively different enough as to require separate treatment (see e.g. Blumenthal et al, 1999; Hanson, 2001). A sample of 32 individuals were interviewed, all of whom had in the past been convicted of such offences. Our goal was to better understand how they were able to desist from re-offending, exploring both the social context of their post-conviction lives and, in particular, their cognitive framing of this context.
Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted for the research. All interviewees were individuals who had been convicted of child sex offending in the past and had been or were currently under the supervision of the probation service in England and Wales. From within this wider population, we sought out two comparable groups of interviewees: one group that appeared to be desisting from crime and a comparison group of individuals who were “persisting” in the sense that they were recently identified as having committed a repeat sexual offence. Both groups were to be identified initially from probation records.

Operationalising these two sample groups presented significant problems in practice. Of course it is not possible to know if an offender is desisting or persisting based on official convictions alone, and self-reports for this type of offence are notably unreliable. Time since the last conviction is certainly a useful proxy measure, however, as previous research (e.g. Hanson et al 2014) has shown that sexual recidivism rates approximately halve after 5 years crime free in the community, and halve again after 10 years. The longer an individual remains crime free in the community (where they could potentially commit another crime) the more likely they are to be truly desisting. It is feasible of course that they may have committed crimes that have not been detected, but recent enhancements in the monitoring and multi-agency management of sexual offenders means a substantial amount of hidden offending is unlikely with a population like this under close professional supervision. The number of convictions was also deemed to be a useful factor. Research suggests that sexual offenders with just one previous conviction are significantly less likely to re-offend than those with two or more previous convictions (Harris and Hanson, 2004).

Ultimately, we operationalized desisting for the purposes of our research as follows: Individuals who had previously been convicted of sexual offences against children, who had been ‘at-risk’ of further offending in the community for at least 5 years, during which time there were no new charges or investigations for sexual offending. The time ‘at-risk’ did not include time spent in prison, so where an individual had spent time in prison this was deducted from the time ‘at-risk’. Our comparison group (of those who clearly could
not be said to be desisting) consisted of individuals who had received convictions for child sex offending on more than one occasion, the most recent of which was for an offence that was within 12 months from the date of the research. Although we did not have evidence (self-report or otherwise) that this group was “persisting” or actively offending at the time of interview, the recent nature of their repeat offending suggests that they could not be said to be in a stable state of desistance either.

This is an imperfect but pragmatic sampling strategy. Imperfect, because it relies on three markers for desistance (number of previous convictions, time since index offence, and self report) that are all problematic in various ways. However, the low re-offending rate amongst sexual offenders actually means that statistically the likelihood of interviewing a desisting sex offender is far larger than interviewing an active or persisting one. As such, it is probably more likely that we have mis-categorized individuals in the “non-desistance” comparison group than in the desistance group. The small size of the comparison group (n=7) is one indication of how difficult it was to identify willing interviewees in the community who met this profile. This group is obviously too small to be able to use to draw strong conclusions about sexual offending, and instead is meant primarily to provide some comparator to our sample of interest (the desisting group).

A total of 25 individuals in the desisting group and 7 in the comparison group were interviewed.\(^3\) It is our intention to revisit these individuals at a later stage to explore whether their desistance has been maintained. This further follow-up period will allow for a longitudinal design that will also strengthen our confidence in our operationalization of desisting/persisting in this study.

Data Collection and Analysis

The research was built on a qualitative, cross-sectional design, which involved in-depth semi-structured interviewing and comparing the life stories of the two groups described above. The narrative data was supplemented by data from probation case records. Data analysis followed a phenomenological approach (e.g. Smith et al, 2009), which meant understanding and interpreting the meanings offenders and ex-offenders place upon their
lives and their position in the world. This reflexive approach was intended to address criticisms that much sex offender research has ignored the context in which individuals live their lives, and to assist in an understanding of the social determinants of sexual behaviour and its cessation.

The analysis of life stories in understanding criminal careers draws together elements of personality psychology and sociology in an approach that has become known as ‘narrative criminology’ (Presser and Sandberg 2015). Narrative criminology is based on the notion that people make sense of their lives by constructing them temporally in sequences broadly understand as ‘stories’ (McAdams 2006). McAdams (2008a: 257) argues that these ‘life stories speak directly to how people come to terms with their interpersonal worlds, with society, and with history and culture.’ The aim of our own research was to gain an appreciation of participants’ own understanding of their lives, and the relationship between these self-understandings and desistance from sexual crime.

Consistent with this, the interview schedule drew upon McAdams’ (2008b) work on narrative methodology. McAdams (2008a) life story interview, designed to assist people in relating their life stories, was used as a basis for the semi-structured interview guide, with some amendments, including a number of new questions aimed specifically at eliciting discussion about the individual’s experiences of offending and criminal justice. Interviews were audio recorded then confidentially transcribed. Thematic content analysis of the anonymised interview transcripts was used to identify patterns of thought and self-perception within and across interview samples. Following the grounded theory method, initial coding to broad themes was followed by more detailed, focused coding (Charmaz 2006).

**Ethics**

One of the reasons research such of ours is so rarely conducted is because of the extreme sensitivity of data like this. People who have committed sexual offences are amongst the most vilified individuals in society, and disclosure of their identities might result in significant risk to them. Additionally, by virtue of the detailed life story interviews many of the participants disclosed sensitive personal information that could be traumatic both
for the interviewer and the interviewee. A detailed ethics plan was therefore devised in order to minimize a broad range of risks relating to both researchers and research participants. These risks included risk of emotional harm to participants through disclosure of traumatic life stories, risk of disclosure of identities of desisting offenders, the risk of relapse into offending following interview, risk of disclosure of personal information about past offending and lives, risk of harm to interviewers when meeting with research participants or visiting research sites, potential for emotional distress for the researchers given the nature of the topic being researched, confidentiality/dealing with disclosure (a detailed ethical plan for this research is available from the authors).

Preliminary Findings

The purpose of the grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2006) is to develop theory to explain the findings of qualitative data. This is an iterative process through which new theories emerge with the review of initial cases, then the theory gradually evolves to accommodate new information as it emerges from the cases. The first part of this theoretical development process is thematic analysis of the raw data, and this section of the article outlines our initial analysis in advance of future theoretical development as the study progresses. The key themes to have emerged thus far from the research are reviewed below.

Situational Offending

Unlike individuals in the comparison group (the ‘non-desisting’ interviewees), most of the interviewees in the desisting group described offending careers consistent with the concept of ‘situational offenders’ (Wortley and Smallbone, 2006). That is, as portrayed in their self-narratives, their sexual offending was situated in a specific set of social circumstances that was not necessarily of their making (or if it was, then those circumstances were not initially designed to gain access to a child to abuse). For example, some offenders abused children they got to know through a work context, some abused children they had responsibility for in their day-to-day lives. Participants in the desisting group were keen to point out they had not sought out these situations in order to abuse the child. Their emphasis of the situational aspects of their offending, therefore, served to
deflect responsibility from internal to external causes. At this point in our analysis we assume this is an important part of the cognitive changes that are a part of desistance because it enables the individual to root the causes of their offending in an external frame and might thus be an adaptive response to difficult circumstances. We intend to conduct further analysis on this theme.

Desisting offenders frequently explained the onset of their offending by emphasising a change in their personal social circumstances that placed them in a situation where they could potentially abuse a child in the absence of a capable guardian. This is reflective of the literature on routine activity theory (Cohen and Felson, 1979). Of course the interviewees would be unaware of this academic theory, but they have, in some cases, developed something like a lay version of routine activity theory in accounting for their own lives. It makes perfect sense that such a narrative might be beneficial for maintaining a sense of self-worth as Garland (2001) refers to routine activity theory as a “Criminology of the Self” (as opposed to “Criminology of the Other”). That is, routine activity theory begins with the idea that crime is committed by normal people who find themselves in specific situations, rather than being the acts of alien “others”).

Whilst essentially a macro-level explanation of crime, routine activity theory has also been used to explain crime at an individual level (e.g. Sampson and Wooldredge, 1987). Cohen and Felson (1979) argued that, for a crime to be committed, three elements need to converge in time and space: 1) A likely offender; 2) A suitable target; 3) The absence of a capable guardian. This convergence arises through the individual’s day-to-day or ‘routine’ activities. Such activities are defined as:

[R]ecurrent and prevalent activities which provide for basic population and individual needs … Thus routine activities would include formalised work, as well as the provision of standardised food, shelter, sexual outlet, leisure, social interaction and childrearing (Cohen and Felson 1979: 593)

In many of the self-narratives of the desisting offenders in this study, changes in their routine activities were precipitated by relationship breakdown or problems. Typically an intimate (adult) relationship would end leaving the individual in a low mood and,
crucially, in a position where he had sole responsibility for a child or children. In other cases, a man’s routine activities changed in more positive ways, for example by gaining employment that placed him in a position where he had access to potential victims. In all cases, however, for the desisting offenders they emphasised in their self-narratives that they had not sought out the change in activities deliberately in order to gain access to victims. The change in routine activities gave the individual access to potential victims in the absence of capable guardians and, for some, in a frame of mind where they acted out of character. From there a process of situational motivation seems to have taken place. A further change in routine activities was mentioned by several participants – this took the form of either reduced contact with their victim or changes in the situational motivation that led to their offending. This raises the possibility, therefore, that the early stages of desistance, as well as the onset of offending, might be situational.

Many of the desisting group seemed genuinely shocked that they had got into a situation in which they abused a child. They consistently reported that their sexual offending (but not the consequences of it) was a small part of their lives, and understood it as a past aberration rather than something that remained part of their personality. This idea of situational motivation has been noted in previous studies. Briar and Piliavin (1965: 36) state:

Because delinquent behavior is typically episodic, purposive, and confined to certain situations, we assume that the motives for such behavior are episodic, oriented to short term ends and confined to certain situations.

It is possible, therefore, that the sexual interest in children for the desisting group in this study was transitory, and confined to certain situations. This would, at least partially, explain their desistance. Ward and Beech (2006: 53), for example, argue that psychological vulnerabilities make it more likely that some people will struggle to deal with situational opportunities and that “individuals can behave in ways they would not normally consider and may even engage in actions that they would view as utterly reprehensible in their normal environments”.

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It is equally possible that this situational aspect of their offending past is a narrative frame that the individuals have retrospectively applied to past behaviours so as to separate their desired, present selves from undesirable past selves. In such cases, the framing itself might be understood as a protective cognition that helps them desist by moving away from the internal and external stigma of their past behaviours.

In either case, it is important to note that most of the comparison group of non-desisting interviewees did not describe their offending as being situational. Instead they described actively seeking out opportunities to offend, and said that their offending played a much larger part in their lives and their self-understandings than did the desisting group. Rather than separating the offending from their “true selves,” they justified the offending by saying it filled purposes such as helping them cope with an on-going sexual arousal to children.

*The Early Stages of Desistance*

The narrative reconstructions of the early stages of desistance (e.g., “turning points” or cognitive transitions) were characterised by a number of factors. For the desisting group, the process of cognitive transformation, or changes in thinking, that precipitated and maintained desistance was about ensuring they were able to maintain a positive sense of self as an essentially good person (see Maruna, 2001). To assist in this, they engaged in a process of ‘neutralisation’ (Sykes and Matza, 1957). As Maruna (2001), however, argues that rather than being seen as part of a ‘hardening’ process, justifying criminal acts, neutralisations might actually be part of a ‘softening’ process, signalling weak attachment to crime and an acceptance of social values. In this way individuals who have broken the law might seek to portray their crimes in the most socially acceptable light to maintain their place in the perceived social order, and as a means of dealing with the shame and stigma induced by their offending.

A Re-Appraisal of the Pros and Cons of Offending

Participants said that in the early stages of desistance they made a rational choice about their behaviour based on a growing realisation of the disadvantages of persistence. For
some, this arose from concerns about the likelihood of being caught, for others it was related to a growing realisation of the harm they were causing. Simplistic versions of rational choice theory as an explanation for crime and desistance have been criticised (e.g., Farrall et al 2014) for assuming that people can simply decide to stop crime and then stop, without any further process taking place. However, the desisting narrators’ accounts in this research shared considerable themes with these rational choice accounts. Indeed, such a theme is largely consistent with the other aspects of the desistance narratives we heard. For example, when motivation is situational, when offending is not part of a general anti-social lifestyle, and when the stakes and consequences for detection are high, then a rational choice to desist may indeed carry much more weight than in other circumstances.

This self-narrative is consistent with Paternoster and Bushway’s (2009) distinction between an individual’s ‘working identity’ as a person who will commit criminal acts, and their ‘future possible self.’ In this model, the start of the desistance process occurs when the identity of offender becomes less satisfying and fears of a bleak and unsatisfying future arise. Thus it is a rational choice, of sorts, when the individual is forced to contemplate between two, possible futures: that of the positive possible self and that of the feared possible self (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009: 1103). Where our participants’ self-narratives differed from Paternoster and Bushway’s theory is in the degree of change required. Paternoster and Bushway argue in favour of substantial cognitive change preceding desistance. In the current research study interviewees said they reverted to a previous, non-offending and conventional lifestyle.

Moreover, detection and conviction appear to have carried with them a significant deterrent effect, sufficient to start the process of cognitive transformation necessary for desistance. Interviewees repeatedly said that they were “shocked” into changing not just their behaviours but also their views about the abuse they were perpetrating and precipitated an end to any consideration of further abuse. A number of participants vividly described their shock at being arrested. Several said that arrest acted as a turning point after which they ceased offending.
Rehabilitation
The narratives of desisting offenders were also pro-rehabilitation. Desisting offenders were likely to describe how they took advantage of rehabilitative efforts provided for them. This manifested itself in several sub-themes in the research, and is probably related to a willingness to change and an ability to make use of formal ‘turning points’ provided by the criminal justice system (see e.g. Giordano et al, 2002). Many of the desisting group talked generally about the usefulness of probation; in particular they seemed appreciative of probation officers who were concerned about them but firm and realistic. Indeed, the personal characteristics of the probation officer seemed to be important, unsurprisingly those who showed a personal interest in the individual were perceived as particularly helpful. Others talked in a positive way about what they had learned in prison. Some participants described using prison as a ‘college’ to obtain qualifications and knowledge they would not otherwise have had access to. This can be seen as a form of a ‘redemption script’ (Maruna 2001) in which the individual seeks to make the most of a bad situation, cognitively turning it to their advantage.

Many of the desisting group talked about the usefulness of sex offender treatment programmes, sometimes provided in prison but mostly the men referred to those provided by probation. This may have been because the programmes provided by probation were more recent, and so easier to bring to mind, or it may be a reflection of the relative utility of community programmes compared to those run in prisons. They particularly appreciated the skills they learned from such programmes. One man who had undertaken his programme some time ago was nevertheless able to recall the tactics he had learned on the course. However, others talked about learning or being reminded of values, and understanding the perspectives of other people. A small number of the group reported disliking having to attend sex offender programmes, one stating he found hearing other men talking about their crimes to be ‘repulsive’.

It is of note that participants talked, on the whole, of the advantages of probation at this stage. In some ways this appears at odds with the findings of Farrall et al (2014). In their study, participants were not able to identify the usefulness of probation until some years
after their initial desistance. Farrall et al attribute this to a readiness to be receptive to the advice of probation officers – some individuals, who are not ready to receive this advice, nevertheless mentally ‘store’ such advice until they are more receptive to change.

For our group, the stakes associated with reoffending were particularly high, and to reoffend would be contrary to the positive self-image they were trying to develop and maintain. It could be that the shock associated with conviction described above led to a desire to conform to rehabilitation efforts that were offered to the individuals.

Planning for the Future
One feature of the desisting sexual offenders’ stories was that they nearly all contained substantial evidence that the participant had a clear sense of their future lives, where they wanted to be and what they wanted to do. In many cases, these aspirations and the expression of tangible goals related to finding employment or maintaining existing or building new relationships. In a way there was a sense of optimism similar to that of Maruna’s (2001) desisting offenders. Although optimistic, most of the narratives contained plans for the future that were reasonably achievable and consistent with the individual’s abilities and social capital. There was a sense of hope for the future that seemed to be related to desistance. Further support for this idea that planning contributes to desistance comes from the work of Willis and Grace (2009), who found worse recidivism outcomes for a group of prison leavers who did not have firm plans for the future, compared with those who did. This suggests that the ability to form plans and maintain optimism is an important part of desisting from sexual crime.

*The Importance of Work*
Research into desistance from non-sexual offending has consistently pointed to the importance of work in the initial stages of desistance (Farrington et al, 1986; Sampson and Laub, 1993; May, 1999). Work is said to help provide meaning to individual lives and give individuals “something to lose” by getting in trouble with the law again. Employment also involves new forms of new routine activities, informal social controls, social supports and the possibility of meeting role models who are not involved in crime.
Indeed, employment and careers did play a highly important role in the narratives of the desisting men in this study (and the potentially active ones as well). Almost all of them described lives that revolved around work of various forms. Some of them had built substantial careers from which they gained considerable satisfaction and financial gain. Others had a series of jobs, and seemed to recover from redundancy easily. In all cases, though, work seemed to be of primary importance to the men in the sample. Indeed, when asked to describe their lives, many of the group described little more than their work lives, as though they hardly existed outside of their work.

Overall most of the desisting group related employment to happiness and life satisfaction – they pointed to job satisfaction and occupying their time as key factors in this sense of satisfaction, but others also mentioned the social aspects of work and opportunities for advancement. One common theme was the importance of keeping busy, and the relationship between this and the earlier themes relating to the situational nature of the sexual offending, in that keeping one’s self busy could be an important part of desistance for some. This seemed to be particularly the case for men who had offended over the internet. These men were aware that if they were sitting at home doing nothing there would be a temptation to access the internet in unhelpful ways.

Most of the desisting men in the study, therefore, wished to be seen as active people, not willing to waste their lives, and wanting to engage in a lifetime of work. Surprisingly, though, gaining employment did not seem to be related to desistance from crime in a direct way for most of the group. First, most of them had careers prior to and during their sexual offending. Second, several described desisting from further criminal activity despite losing their jobs as part of their convictions. Consistent with the literature (Brown et al, 2007), a number of participants reported the difficulties they had in obtaining work following their conviction. Some of them reported how employers would reject them when they learned of their conviction, and some had a resigned helplessness that they would never work again. However, this did not seem to affect the fact that they were desisting, and some men described quite innovative forms of self employment they had devised in order to compensate for not being able to obtain formal work. Third and most
importantly, comparison group (non-desisting) interviewees also described considerable attachment to employment in their self-understandings. Therefore as central as work was in their personal narratives, it is not clear that work played a necessary and sufficient role in the explanation of their ability to desist from crime.

The Role of Relationships

In the same way that employment has been found to be significant in promoting desistance from non-sexual crime, so have relationships with significant others (e.g. Laub et al, 1998; Maruna, 2001). The factors underlying the importance of relationships for non-sexual offenders are thought to be similar to those described above for work – relationships give people a sense of meaning in their lives, and an emotional investment that they do not wish to lose. New relationships can disrupt routine activities and provide a form of informal control (as in ‘if you do that again, I’ll leave’).

It is not surprising that relationships featured heavily in the narrative accounts of the men in this study. Most of the desisting group described lengthy relationship histories, which clearly had great significance for them and their life stories. However, the relevance of these relationship histories for desistance was by no means clear, and was certainly not as clear-cut as the linear relationships between forming a relationship and desisting as suggested by some of the research into non-sexual crime. The preponderance of desistance research suggests that forming new and meaningful relationships can be the start of the desistance process, giving individuals the social capital they need to begin a crime-free life. This did not seem to be the case for the desisting offenders in this study. Their offences were committed alone, not as part of organised crime involving others, therefore the idea that severing links with criminogenic relationships assisted desistance was not relevant. Furthermore, the crime and subsequent detection for some men resulted in the ending of relationships that might have otherwise acted as a protective factor. Overall many of the men in the desisting group had lengthy relationship histories but also seemed to have experienced relationship breakdown on at least one, and sometimes numerous occasions. On the other hand, where relationships had continued (that is, where significant others had ‘stuck by them’), this seemed to have been of great importance to
the individual. Several participants were concerned with the impact of their offending, and the stigma associated with it, on their family, principally their wife or partner. This apparent concern with the well being and reactions of intimates may lend tentative support to Braithwaite’s (1989) ‘reintegrative shaming’ theory which emphasises the role of ‘significant others’ in the process of reintegration and desistance. This is an area we intend to explore further.

Conclusion

Although these are early, tentative findings that will develop as our analysis progresses, a number of important themes are beginning to emerge. Much research into desistance from non-sexual crime points to a picture that sets desistance from persistent crime in a context of maturation characterised by development of goods such as employment and relationships. These goods serve to give the desisting individual ‘social capital,’ a sense of belonging, a change in routine activities and something they are afraid to lose.

However, desistance for the sexual offenders in this study seemed to be rather different. On the whole they were not a group of people with significant histories of antisocial behaviour. In their narratives, they portrayed their offending and motivation for offending as situational and temporary. Unlike many non-sexual offenders, they did not portray their desistance as a result of “growing up” or becoming more mature, instead, for the most part, desistance was portrayed as a self-initiated or rational choice about the pros and cons of what they were doing. Many said that the shock of their arrest contributed to the choice they made about continuing with their crime. They also extolled the virtues of structured rehabilitation programmes, including probation supervision and sex offender treatment programmes, and they attributed their ability to maintain desistance to this help. Finally, they had an optimistic set of plans for the future. Although employment and relationships were of primary importance, these factors did not seem to be related to their desistance in the way these things are traditionally understood in desistance research, in that there was not a linear relationship between obtaining these social goods and consequent desistance. However, the level of neutralisations employed by the participants seemed to be related to shame about their offending and signalled their attachment to the perceived moral values
and social goods of society. This is further demonstrated by the fact that, on the whole, apart from their sexual offending, most of the desisting participants seemed to live conventional (that is, non-criminal) lifestyles involving, in particular, work and relationships.

These emerging findings have a number of potential implications for current frameworks around sex offender risk assessment, management and treatment, and in particular for how professionals perceive of and respond to ‘risks’ posed by sex offenders. While the preponderance of current work has centred on ‘risk’ factors and examining why sex offenders re-offend, this study has inverted the risk paradigm by seeking to draw out why is it that they don’t. As noted at the outset of the paper, the relevance of these research findings on desistance from sexual crime relate to the determination of the best and most effective means of working with people convicted of sexual offences. Not least is the fact that these findings tend to reinforce the importance and usefulness of rehabilitative programmes provided by probation and prison including accredited programme work in supporting narratives of change. Moreover, the desisting narratives in this study which appear to be shaped by conventional lifestyles and planning for the future, also tend to support a move away from confessional, backward looking approaches towards future-focused therapeutic interventions with sex offenders with an emphasis on optimism and hope.

Notes

1 This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [grant number ES/K006061/1]. The research data and materials cannot be made open access due to the sensitivity of the data.

2 When the research began we struggled to identify suitable candidates for this group so the 5-year rule was initially relaxed to 3 years. Consequently a number of participants (8) with fewer than 5 crime free years were interviewed before a more reliable means of identifying those who had been crime-free for longer periods. These individuals will be followed up to monitor their total desistance over the two years leading up to their 5-year desistance. Additionally, one individual who was initially interviewed as a member of the comparison group was felt to more resemble the desisting group as what was thought to be a new conviction turned out to be an unfounded allegation.

3 These categories are fluid and the breakdown could shift in the longer term depending on how one operationalises the constructs of desistance/persistence.
References


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