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An Integrative Approach to Apprehend Desistance

Isabelle F.-Dufour[1], Renée Brassard[1], and Joane Martel[1]

Abstract

The *process* underlying desistance is still a strong subject of debate. This article seeks to introduce several core concepts of Archer's morphogenic approach to study *how* people desist from crime. At first, it discusses the primary existing theories of desistance. Then, this article demonstrates the usefulness of this approach by presenting empirical evidence drawn from semistructured interviews collected with 29 men who desisted from crime in an eastern province of Canada. The study demonstrates how this alternative approach allows for the consolidation of existing knowledge on desistance. Then implication of these findings for both theory and practice are discussed.

Context

The primary challenge in studying desistance is that it is impossible to say with certainty that an offender's criminal career has ended. According to several authors, a year-long period of abstinence since the last offense, as recorded in criminal files or based on the offender's confession, is a sufficient length of time to distinguish between desisting offenders and persistent offenders (Maruna, 1998, 2001). According to other authors, a reduction in the seriousness and frequency of criminal acts indicates that desistance has begun. Still, other authors maintain that an offender has desisted from crime definitively only when she/he is deceased (Bushway, Piquero, Mazerolle, Broidy, & Cauffman, 2001). Another difficulty arises from the fact that criminal

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careers often are found to have a "zigzag" trajectory, where periods of criminality alternate with lulls in criminal behavior (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Piquero, 2004). Hence, it is impractical to establish an abstinence period that ensures the complete cessation of criminal activity. Because of this *cul-de-sac*, the cessation of criminal activities is distinguished, here, from the desistance process as described in the following:

> Termination is the time at which criminal activity stops. Desistance, by contrast, is the causal process that supports the termination of offending. While it is difficult to ascertain when the process of desistance begins, it is apparent that it continues after the termination of offending [. . .]. By using different terms for these distinct phenomena, we separate termination (the outcome) from the dynamics underlying the process of desistance (the cause), which have been confounded in the literature to date. (Laub & Sampson, 2001, p. 11)

Given the added value of knowledge on the desistance process for the criminal justice system (Maguire, 2007), and for criminal justice practitioners (McNeill, 2004), it is paramount to understand how the desistance process unfolds. Following a brief review of current theories regarding the crime-desistance process, we propose an alternative framework that offers, in our view, a refined understanding of this phenomenon.

A Review of the Literature

Desistance as a Natural Process of Maturation

The first group of theoretical explanations of desistance emerges from an ontogenetic perspective, here referring to the natural process of maturation. Since Quételet's (1831/2003) seminal study, it has been observed that the number of offences committed by an individual increases during adolescence and progressively decreases throughout adulthood. This is the case for all individuals, regardless of sex, ethnicity, type of offense, or duration of criminal activities (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). However, considering desistance only from an ontogenetic maturation point of view is not useful as this perspective provides no information either on the process leading to the cessation of criminal behavior or on the factors that may accelerate it (Maruna, 1998).

Desistance as a Structural Outcome

To fill this gap, a second thread of research, belonging to a structural paradigm, holds that a social fact consists of "any ways of acting, thinking or feeling, fixed or not, that are capable of exerting an external constraint on an individual or are diffused throughout the given society but have a life of their own, independent of individual manifestation" (Durkheim, 1963, p. 107). According to tenants of this paradigm, society, by diffusing norms and sanctions, "forces" individuals to desist from crime. The most famous work on desistance informed by this paradigm is that of Laub and Sampson (2001, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993, 2003). According to these authors (1993), the

key turning points associated with desistance are involvement in a domestic union, employment, and military experience.[1] The authors' explanatory approach relies on two theories: social-control theory (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990) and differential-association theory (Sutherland & Cressey, 1960). In a nutshell, according to these authors, desistance occurs when "good things happen to bad actors" (Laub, Nagin, & Sampson, 1998, p. 237).

Several studies have supported the linkage suggested by Sampson and Laub (1993) between involvement in a domestic union and crime desistance (Massoglia & Uggen, 2007; Sampson, Laub, & Wimer, 2006) as well as between employment and desistance (Cusson & Pinsonneault, 1986; Kruttschnitt, Uggen, & Shelton, 2000; Savolainen, 2009; Shover, 1996). However, a number of studies reported mitigated results regarding the overall impact of these turning points on desistance (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Haggard, Gumpert, & Grann, 2001; Horney, Osgood, & Marshall, 1995; Kruttschnitt et al., 2000; Massoglia & Uggen, 2007; Wadsworth, 2006). Beyond the lack of consensus regarding the causal relationships between involvement in a domestic union, employment, and desistance, several studies suffer from methodological flaws as they have generally (1) utilized secondary data that are often incomplete, (2) had high attrition rates,[2] or (3) relied on official databases to establish the presence or the absence of criminal behaviors, whereas according to Farrall (2004), only 2% of offenses garner a form of criminal punishment. Moreover, social-relation measurements are limited to the immediate social network (family and employer) and are agnostic regarding the "intensity" of these relationships (Kazemian, Farrington, & Le Blanc, 2009). To avoid such pitfalls, others have reverted to using qualitative methods to document structural influences on desistance.

Farrall's (2002) study led him to argue that desistance is only possible when individuals have access to (1) social capital, that is to say, reciprocal relations (mutually strengthening relationships) forged between individuals; (2) a shared set of ideologies enabled by the stability of these relationships, which can be used to establish obligations; and (3) expectations and norms, which in turn facilitate the attainment of certain goals or encourage one's commitment to civil society or cooperation.[3] Barry (2006) makes a similar observation, as the 20 young women and 20 young men whom she interviewed declared that they had desisted from crime because

> of the emergence of a feeling of interdependence and empathy towards the individuals of their community; such feeling being born in relation to the creation of a new *social identity* which provided them with the sense of being useful and incited them to open up to the opportunities and modes of integration that criminal life did not give them. (Barry, 2006, p. 418, italics added)

Social identity, here, refers to the actualization of a social role, such as that of student, partner, parent, employee, or volunteer. Finally, Webster, MacDonald, and Simpson (2006, p.18) concur that stable relationships, parenthood, and employment are "critical factors in both motivating and sustaining desistance." To summarize, these three studies suggest that offenders must feel that they belong to at least one community (a school, a family, the employment sector, or a charitable society), and

have access to its resources (social capital) to be able to desist from crime, regardless of their initial motivation (or lack thereof).

Challenges of Structural Theories

The primary problem faced by the above structural explanations is that they maintain that the desistance process relies on individuals' relationships with others. The paradox lies in that many studies imply that offenders have difficult (or non-existent) social and family relations and that, in many cases, the only relations that they have are those they have developed with other offenders (Thornberry, 1997). These individuals are therefore less likely to be influenced by the family or by the proximal informal social control[4] (Hunter, 1985) exerted by religious institutions, employers, civic associations, and community organizations because less often do they experience these types of social relations. Moreover, offenders are less likely to accept the proximal social control exerted by the community[5] because the stigma associated with their experience in the criminal justice system often reinforces their sense of being an "outsider," a lesser citizen (Uggen, Manza, & Behrens, 2004). In this line of thought, some offenders become animated by feelings of distrust and bitterness toward the community (Bracken, Deane, & Morrissette, 2009). In some extreme cases, desistance has been seen to ensue following offenders' own isolation from others (Haggard et al., 2001; p. 1061), a situation that further challenges this particular explanation of desistance. Considering such drawbacks in the structural explanation of desistance, other scholars have turned to an agential paradigm as an alternative perspective to understand this social phenomenon.

Desistance as an Individual Decision

According to Karl Popper, agential perspectives amalgamate "collective phenomena to the actions, interactions, aims, hopes, and thoughts of individual men [*sic*] and to traditions created and preserved by individuals" (1956, p. 198). Thus, it is by understanding these actors' intentions, their interrelations with other actors, and the rules guiding their conduct that we can understand social phenomena such as desistance. The studies located within this paradigm reject any form of social determinism, believing actors to be relatively autonomous from social structures and environmental pressures. In this context, desistance corresponds to offenders' decisions and strategies to stop committing offenses when they assess that there are more drawbacks than advantages to committing crimes (Haggard et al., 2001; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). Cusson and Pinsonneault (1986, p. 78), for example, argued that the decision to desist from crime is made following either prison trauma, betrayal by other offenders, feeling "worn out" by criminal life, or because objective reasons to continue committing offenses have ceased to exist. In short, as long as offenders deem it advantageous to commit crimes, they will persist; when the costs become too high, they desist. However, other studies show that, before committing an offense, offenders give more consideration to the rewards than to the risks (Tunnell, 1992). Moreover, offenders tend to be less concerned with long-term planning than with living for the moment

(Jacobs & Wright, 1999; Shover, 1996). This implies that offenders, at some point, may decide to desist from crime; however, it appears reductive to sustain that the basis of such decision solely is the result of a cost-benefit calculation. Other studies informed by this paradigm have attempted to identify cognitive or identity changes within offenders that may explain how they desist from crime.

Shover (1983, 1996) was the first to demonstrate an interest in identity changes in desisters. He identified four components frequently connected to the cessation of criminal activities: (1) a better assessment of the risks related to crime, (2) an awareness of the brevity of life, (3) the development of new aspirations and desires, and (4) important changes in self-judgment and in the appraisal of others (Shover, 1983, p. 208). Apart from making changed cost-benefit calculations, offenders must adopt also a new life perspective to trigger the onset of the desistance process. For example, they must lean toward "contentment, peace, and harmony in their interpersonal relations" (Shover, 1996, p. 134). As indicated in Burnett's study (1992, 1994, quoted in Burnett & Maruna, 2004), this longing for a harmonious and peaceful life appears to be shared by the majority of offenders (80% of his sample), but in reality, only a few (18% of his respondents) were able to reach this point successfully. It appears that hope—defined as "the general perception that an individual has of the probability she/he will reach her personal goals" (Stotland, 1969, described in Burnett & Maruna, 2004, p. 395)— played a preeminent role in the success of those who were able to desist. Desistance thus cannot be explained merely as the result of a rational cost-benefit calculation coupled with one's wish to live a more peaceful and harmonious life. The belief that one *can* change one's own life also is necessary. According to Maruna (1998, 2001), what distinguishes those who *can* from those who *cannot* desist from crime is essentially their narrative script.[6] Offenders persisting in crime are said to use a narrative script of condemnation (e.g., they have little or no hope of changing their lives), while those who desist tend to employ a narrative script of redemption (e.g., they become the architects of their lives and want to do "good"). Consequently, according to Maruna (2001, p. 96), desistance appears to emerge from within the offender.

Although Maruna (1998, 2001) is a key proponent of agential explanations of desistance, he nevertheless concedes that, taken in isolation, the rational decision to desist is insufficient. He acknowledges that in order to "go straight," the individual must experience personal achievements in the non-criminal sphere in addition to having the chance to consider multiple options regarding his/her future (Maruna, 2001, pp. 25-26). A few years later, Maruna, LeBel, Mitchell, and Naples (2004) came to the conclusion that these achievements outside the criminal sphere must be recognized also for offenders to be reintegrated successfully into society: "Maintaining successful desistance might involve the negotiation of a reformed identity through a process of prosocial labelling" (p. 279).

Giordano et al.'s (2002, pp. 1027-1053) approach to desistance seems to summarize adequately this group of studies on desistance. According to these scholars, desistance proceeds in four sequential steps: (1) the offender must be open to change; (2) she/he must then recognize and seize the "hooks for change" that are present in her/his environment (such as employment or a prosocial partner); (3) she/he must develop a new

representation of herself/himself (a "replacement self"); and (4) she/he must reframe deviance as being unacceptable from that point forward.

Challenges of Agential Perspectives

The chief dilemma of these perspectives that argue that change actively is initiated through actors is their inability to answer the following questions: What provides motivation? How do offenders become "open to change"? and How do they become "architects of their own lives"? A closer look at Giordano and her colleagues' approach to desistance brings into light their own admission that they had "oversimplified" (Giordano et al., 2002, p. 1055) the relationship between cognitive change and agents' actions, whereas the theory relies on the idea that cognitive change *precedes* desistance. In fact, the authors could not refute an alternative sequence whereby (1) the offender would seize, first, the hooks for change without ceasing his/her criminal activities (e.g., she/he could secure legitimate employment while still selling illegal drugs). Progressively, this offender would identify with her/his employment and, ultimately, reconsider her/his life choices. She/he could then (2) develop a replacement self that would lead her/him to (3) choose to desist from crime and, perhaps, to (4) reconsider criminality as unacceptable from that point forward. Such an alternative sequence to Giordano and her collaborators' theorization (2002) brings us back to the starting point: this explanation corresponds to the one developed by Laub and Sampson (2001, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993, 2003).

The clearest observation that can be made following this succinct theoretical précis of the desistance process is that it may be unreasonable to envisage desistance as the sole result of either societal forces alone or individual choices (Vaughan, 2007). On the contrary, "Research must focus on untangling the relationship among individual behavior [and] structural disadvantage" (Veysey, Martinez, & Christian, 2013, p. 246). Some studies have attempted already to reconcile individual behavior with social structure, but they seem flawed according to Vaughan (2001). Vaughan (2007) attempted himself to theorize desistance using the perspective of internal conversation developed by British theorist Margaret Archer in 2003. However, Vaughan's preference was perilous since Archer's most recent work is considered by some to be incomplete yet (see Mutch, 2004; Vandenberghe, 2005). Consequently, the remaining of the paper will focus on Archer's previous work (1995, 1996, 2000, 2002) as a promising integrative approach to apprehend the desistance process. This article is structured along similar lines to those used frequently in desistance study, whereby relevant theories are presented via a conceptual decoupage—presented by concept—and are documented by interview excerpts (e.g., Farrall, 2005; Maruna et al., 2004).

Method

Between January 2010 and September 2010, interviews were conducted with 29 desisters living, at the time, in an eastern province of Canada. They were selected from a larger population of 4,453 men who had received a conditional sentence of at least one year between 2001 and 2009, and had not reoffended subsequently. Data were

Table 1. Characteristics of the Respondents.

	Socio-judicial characteristics			At the time of the interview		
	Crime that led to conditional sentence	Age at sentence	Length of sentence (months)	Length of cessation (years)	Living with partner	Sharing/having custody of children	Having a job or insurance benefits
John	Violence	33	24	2	No	No	No
Claude	Drugs	33	16	2	No	Yes	No
Thomas	Sex	40	18	2	No	No	No
Baptiste	Violence	63	24	2	No	No	Yes
Kevin	Drugs	32	14	3	No	Yes	Yes
Nathan	Drugs	23	12	4	No	Yes	Yes
Hubert	Violence	34	15	4	No	No	No
Roger	Property	42	18	4	Yes	No	Yes
Patrick	Property	23	24	5	No	No	Yes
Edouard	Property	35	18	5	No	No	Yes
Francis	Violence	37	18	5	No	No	No
Victor	Drugs	45	12	5	Yes	Yes	Yes
David	Unknown	22	18	6	No	No	Yes
Mathias	Drugs	25	18	6	No	No	Yes
Lucien	Violence	33	18	6	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sam	Sex	40	24	6	No	Yes	Yes
Walter	Violence	46	18	6	Yes	Yes	Yes
Yvon	Violence	56	18	6	Yes	No	No
Albert	Sex	60	24	6	No	No	No
Oscar	Property	32	18	7	No	No	Yes
Xavier	Property	35	36	7	Yes	Yes	Yes
Alphonse	Sex	38	15	7	No	No	Yes
Jean-Claude	Sex	42	12	7	No	No	Yes
Ivan	Property	53	18	7	No	Yes	Yes
Benoit	Sex	55	24	7	No	No	Yes
Ulysse	Drugs	21	27	8	Yes	No	Yes
Charles	Sex	70	24	8	Yes	No	No
Denis	Violence	41	24	9	Yes	Yes	Yes
George	Drugs	41	24	9	Yes	Yes	Yes

collected using a semistructured interview format which enables the taking into account of perceptions and experiences of the respondents, the comparison between the answers obtained (Savoie-Zajc, 2009) as well as the exploration of unanticipated aspects of the studied phenomena (Charmaz, 2003). The interview format was designed to build on prior narrative studies of desistance. In accordance with Miles and Huberman's (1994) recommendation, data analysis was carried out simultaneously with data collection. Consequently, participants were selected gradually as analytical components of the desistance process became increasingly evident and stopped when saturation was obtained (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Pires, 1997). Initially, the key recruitment criterion was that of being an adult male. Then, by degrees, comparisons and contrasts were made between respondents, based on age, marital status, primary source of income, nature of the crime committed, and criminal record (see Table 1). Their age varied between 21 and 70, and the length of their sentence varied from 1 to 3 years.[7] Eight respondents had been sentenced for a crime against the person, six

for a crime against property, seven for sexual crime, seven were sentenced for drug-related activities. Given the importance of the length of time since the *termination* of criminal behavior, respondents were also contrasted on the basis of this characteristic. Ten respondents terminated their criminal activities over 7 years prior to the study, the majority (14) terminated within 4 to 6 years, 1 in the previous 3 years, and 4 others in the previous 2. Data were analyzed using a general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) with QDA Miner software (version 4.0.8). One interview was reassessed using the "code overlap" criterion; the result showed a 95.9% ratio.[8]

The Findings

This section presents the findings from the interviews conducted with 29 desisters. The findings are presented and discussed by concepts issued from Margaret Archer's morphogenetic approach. Our purpose is not to discuss every aspect of this approach[9] but rather to illustrate the main concepts contributing to a better understanding of the desistance process of offenders under community surveillance.

Involuntarily Position Within the Social Structure

Archer argues that agents are born within a social structure that is pre-existent to them (although this structure is the product of other agents in the course of history). This means that a newborn infant, for example, "is involuntarily and *objectively* part of a privileged/unprivileged continuum in terms of material resources" (Archer, 2003, p. 136). Archer (1995) argues that some agents will find it more advantageous to maintain the structures (usually agents whom the structure favors), whereas others will attempt to transform it (usually agents whom the structure does not favor). Because all agents do not have the same interests, the actions borne by agents in various social positions, when mingling, opposing, and facing each other, will contribute to the (re) production of the social structure. Therefore, according Archer (1995), social structure is therefore the result of internal relations among groups of agents occupying various social positions.[10]

For Archer, not only is the structure *real*, it also is represented symbolically by agents who have an idea or a concept of what the "structure" is. This tacit knowledge may exhibit varying degrees of accuracy. The Earth has never been flat in reality; however, humans believed for many years that it was. Thus, there may be a significant discrepancy between the various representations that individuals have of the structure and the "true reality" of the structure. Nevertheless, this representation is not arbitrary:

> The concepts an individual has at his/her disposal to apprehend the social structure are based on reality and connected in a more or less systematic way, forming a kind of map of society. The agent therefore has tacit or explicit knowledge of social rules and conventions and knows how to use them in practice. (Vandenberghe, 2007, p. 504)

In summary, there are similarities between individuals' "maps of society." It is through such "maps" that agents realize where they "belong" on the continuum of privileged/underprivileged spaces.

Agents also become aware that this involuntary placement within the social structure corresponds to vested interests (being willing to maintain or change the social structure). According to Archer (2010), these vested interests are entirely *objective*: either individuals benefit from privileges, institutional facilitators,[11] and satisfying social identities or they do not. Nothing forces privileged agents to maintain the status quo or underprivileged agents to promote change, but if they do not act according to their vested interests, the *objective* costs of pursuing a different goal likely will be higher.

> Society does not impose anything, but the differential costs associated with each position constitute a reason for choosing one direction rather than the other [. . .]. This initial choice can be corrected but other costs are also attached to the rectification or reorientation of one's life. (Archer, 1995, pp. 205-207)

Archer (2010) adds that the causal power of vested interests (guiding agents in one direction rather than another) can be activated only *in relation* to agents' projects. Without a project, there is neither a facilitator nor a constraint. Incidentally, according to critical realists, all projects are not accessible to all agents. Indeed, the simultaneous encounter between involuntary placement within the social structure, vested interests, and the costs of opportunities influences the *choice* of projects that the agent wishes to conduct. The factors compelling a totally free interpretation of events are the costs and benefits associated with the various assessments of the situation in question. Thus, the "objective distribution of the costs and benefits conditions both the *interpretation* and the action" (Archer, 1995, p. 209, italics added).

It is simple to grasp the real effect of the social structure on offenders' initial choices. Indeed, the idea that they tend to come from impoverished milieus or ethno-cultural minorities has achieved consensus (Barry, 2006; Farrall, 2002, Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Shover, 1996). Taking this reality into account, Archer's morphogenetic perspective suggests that, in general, offenders are born into a disadvantaged structural position, and they have limited access to resources. As a result, several life projects are objectively more difficult to reach. In this context, crime can then appear to be an option to rebalance life opportunities (Maruna, 2001; Shover, 1996).

> Crime isn't the solution for everyone. Not an open door for all. Often just for guys with specific backgrounds . . . Poorest people in fact. Definitely not an option for anyone at all.
> —David (pseudonym)

Nascent Personal and Social Identities

It is typically during adolescence that disenfranchised individuals begin to engage with the social identity of the offender (see Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). It is also

generally at this time that human beings develop personal identities. Personal identity is related to the orientation of each human agent toward what preoccupies her/him the most (Archer, 2002, p. 14). It encompasses self-assessments as well as appraisals of the world: the prioritization of values and concerns are the constitutive elements that make each person unique (Archer, 2000). Each person, by means of reflexivity,[12] assesses the objective conditions in which she finds herself and prioritizes her ultimate lifetime project (becoming rich, saving the world, being famous, etc.). During adolescence, this emerging personal identity then begins to consider emerging social identities it could invest in order to achieve the individual's ultimate project. Then, by adopting a social identity, the human agent realizes which rules and conditions are associated with this identity. If she/he realizes at this point that she/he no longer wishes to invest in this identity, she/he can modify her/his selection. However, even when a social identity is assumed only temporarily, the personal identity changes, both subjectively and objectively. In a subjective sense, by taking on this identity, the human agent acquires new knowledge of herself/himself, which enables her/him to discover and modify certain aspects of her/him personal identity. In an objective sense, the opportunity costs also fluctuate which may make it simpler or more challenging to select a different social identity. Thus, an individual who espouses temporarily the social identity of an offender may realize that it does not suit her/him. However, if she/he is arrested at least once, the weight of her/his criminal record objectively will hinder the completion of her/his change in social identity. Extant literature suggests, for example, that upon the adoption of a "criminal" social identity, some teenagers will discard it almost immediately (Moffit, 1993). Using Archer's perspective (2000, 2002), we can then assume that these teenagers have realized promptly that such criminal social identity did not suit their personal identity. On the contrary, when the human agent is satisfied with her/his social identities, she/he must decide "how much" of herself/himself she/he will invest in it. At this particular moment, a synthesis occurs between personal identity and social identity. Indeed, all humans simultaneously must personify several social identities (student, parent, partner, practitioner, athlete, etc.). However, based on the ultimate preoccupations that lie at the heart of each personal identity, every human will assess how much of themselves they are prepared to devote to each social identity, apart from determining which resources they will *invest* in managing these preoccupations.

> The result is the personal identity *within which* the social identities are assigned a space in an individual's life. This space can be large ("she lives for her job") or small ("she's only there for the money") but nothing ensures that the social preoccupations will have automatic priority. The individual is the one who prioritise[s]. (Archer, 2002, p. 19; italics in original)

The literature shows that some individuals identify themselves with their "criminal social identity" and sometimes find satisfaction in it (Maruna, 2001; Shover, 1996). Many come to consider the fellow-offender group as a "second family" (Warr, 1998), a place where they feel entrusted with some importance, and where they are "somebody" (Shover, 1996). Consequently, some people find that this identity suits their

personal identity (and their ultimate preoccupations), and some adolescents or young adults may thus invest a great deal of energy in becoming "good criminals" (Shover, 1996). Depending on what they see as the most important factors in personifying this social identity, some of them may choose to specialize in a particular type of crime as an adult (see Maruna, 2001). Others' ambitions may be to climb the ranks of a criminal organization. Depending on their ultimate preoccupations (becoming rich, achieving power within the group, committing the perfect crime, etc.), individuals, such as Xavier and Nathan, may invest considerable energy into their criminal social identity:

> I've always had a fascination with crime. When I was young, I devoured stories about criminals like Jacques Mesrine and Richard Blass, and I'd say to myself: "Well, boys, you ain't seen nothin' yet!" —Xavier

> You know, being a crook, people don't realize it, but it's tough work. Yep, you work hard. It's just not on what other people might call [. . .] the right path. —Nathan

Once again, nothing is fixed. In the same way that a person's preoccupations may evolve over time, some social identities may be abandoned because they no longer relate to a person's personal identity, whereas others may be invested more strongly at some point in one's life.

Vested Interests Attached to Social Identities

According to Archer (1995), every time a human agent espouses a social identity, she/he acquires the vested interests that are attached to it. These interests are "vested" because she/he cannot freely interpret a social identity as each comes with certain expectations, endorsements, and promotions encouraging conformity, and a "leaning" that the human agent must adopt to some extent. These factors are not necessarily determinants, but failing to conform to the expectations intrinsic to a social identity may expose the person to constraints or to a loss of privileges. Endorsing a criminal social identity generally means subscribing to its standards and expectations for loyalty, respect, and recognition. For example, an individual who betrays her/his accomplice is likely to be shunned by offender groups. She/he must conform minimally to the social expectations underlying the social identity.

Frequently, this social identity is embedded into the personal identity ("I am a thief," "I have always been a bandit"), and this personal identity is constructed in opposition to the unfavorable social structure into which individuals involuntarily were born. They may dismiss norms, penalties, and rules defined "outside" the criminal world as being meaningless. As Uggen et al. (2004) found, and Bracken et al. (2009) later corroborated, offenders' sense of occupying a disadvantaged social position may be expressed as mistrust and bitterness towards the community. As a result, they may see no point in developing institutional ties with anyone associated with law-abiding citizens as conveyed by Xavier:

> For me, those people act just like brainless sheep, following each other blindly. And they're all the same. The only ones who don't act the same are the crooks. At least there's some respect in a crook's world. —Xavier.

The literature further suggests that an agent embodying a "criminal" social identity eventually is confronted to the constraints inherent to the role, such as the weight of one's criminal record, peers' betrayal, the loss of family connections, and so on. This is the moment when the individual measures the risks related to criminal activities (Shover, 1996). Some argue that this is precisely when they take full account of the vested interests of their criminal social identities (e.g., negative experiences of crime, arrests, incarcerations), and that this leads individuals to desist from crime (Cusson & Pinsonneault, 1986; Haggard et al., 2001). Our data suggest that although individuals may appreciate the negative vested interests of their criminal identity, some feel that their criminal record makes it impractical for them to discard this identity:

> I applied for a job as a forklift operator. They turned me down because I had a criminal record. The job paid 12 bucks an hour. That's when I understood… I wasn't asking for a heap, just a job at 12 bucks an hour, but I had a record. —Patrick

Hence, offenders may feel that they cannot change their life and that they are "doomed to remain criminals" (Maruna, 2001, p. 74).

> I was going through what you might call my own ethical crisis. But I was just paralyzed. It was like I was stuck in a black hole. —David.

Strong facilitators are thus necessary for desistance to occur. Moreover, access to social capital appears to be crucial (Barry, 2006; Farrall, 2002) as offenders who experience personal achievements outside the criminal world, and who can consider several options regarding their future, may desist from crime (Maruna, 1998, 2001). In addition, when probation officers facilitate the rebuilding of family, friendship, or community bonds, offenders are likely to desist from further crime (Farrall, 2002). When the community offers hooks for change to offenders, they may desist from crime (Giordano et al., 2002) in a similar fashion as individuals who benefit from a partner's, employer's, or colleagues' support are more likely to desist from crime (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Therefore, although there is no consensus in the literature regarding the aspects of social capital that *most favor* desistance, it appears clear that without minimal access to this form of capital, desistance is unlikely to occur. However, the question remains: How does social capital favor desistance?

Social Capital and Desistance

Based on Archer's studies (2000, 2002), we suggest that access to social capital favors the personification of social identities likely to promote the initiation of the desistance process. Indeed, it has been documented that efficient interventions in support of the

desistance process are those that help offenders reconsider their priorities and (re) construct prosocial connections (Farrall, 2002; McCulloch, 2005; Rex, 1999). Thus, there appears to be some convergence toward the idea that the provision of such help favors the embodiment of social identities that were previously perceived as unreachable. In other cases, it appears that ontogenetic maturation in itself may lead offenders to reconsider their ultimate preoccupations. Progressively, the offender may then decide to invest more energy in the social identities that are more connected to her/his new preoccupations (e.g., being a respectable father, a worthy partner, etc.). Thus, according to Archer (2000, 2002), the fulfillment or embodiment of new social identities may trigger, in offenders, personal identity changes, hereby acquiring new self-knowledge which could provide a different sense of agency (i.e., a sense that they have some power over their life and surroundings) necessary to circumvent reoffending (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna 1998, 2001; Shover, 1996) or to feel they could benefit from certain structural advantages (e.g., access to income, social recognition) that would *objectively* orient them toward desistance.

Most community sentences, such as probation, intensive supervision, and conditional sentences, require the "active collaboration" of offenders in their own reintegration (Kaminski, 2006; Vacheret, 2006). To reach this aim, community sentences usually include a series of conditions such as securing employment, attending school or rehabilitative programs, and so on. Lack of compliance with such conditions may be perceived as a motivation deficiency, and could mean a loss of privileges for the offender (Vacheret, 2006). Most of the desisters we interviewed admitted to securing employment or undertaking some form of training either to "look good" or to gain other privileges (e.g., to discontinue house arrest). However, even without any real intention of personifying a novel social identity, respondents used their "map of society" to select environments amenable to citizens with criminal records:

> In the construction business, people are . . . let's just say they're not exactly like the ones in an office (amused laugh) . . . they're more open, you see. Everybody knew [that he had a record]; it just wasn't a problem. It didn't change how they acted toward me, you know.
> —Nathan.

Similarly to several respondents, Nathan's employment strategy brings into light his agentic reflexivity in his choice of a project deemed reachable to him. This challenges the idea according to which the employment they secure are "good things happen[ing] to bad actor[s]" (Laub et al., 1998, p. 237). Contrary to Giordano et al.'s study (2002), our own findings suggest that offenders may take advantage of "hook for change" in the absence of an openness to change. We argue, thus, that the "prosocial labelling" (Maruna et al., 2004, p. 279) concomitant with the new social identity precedes the decision to desist as David explains:

> I was back in school, and working. And in the course of things, I grew closer to certain people. My mother started to believe in me again. I didn't want to spoil that! The doorway [to crime] was now closed. With good people around you, you make sure that doorway is

locked tight. It all happens naturally and things just fall into place. And people change. OK, I'm not a saint (he laughs) but neither am I a crook now. —David.

Shredding the Criminal Identity

Depending on the success they obtain in the non-criminal world, the opportunities present, or the social roles they personify, some offenders will begin a new life cycle and will shed their criminal identity. When they reach the launch of the following cycle of identity transformation, they may be placed in a different situation in terms of accessing structural resources (if employed, for example). Certainly, their personal identity will have changed within the first cycle. They will begin the cycle again, this time with a different project: persisting in their desistance. Again, they will face facilitators and constraints that will need to be assessed subjectively. In this line of thought, and as several others did, Nathan and Ivan reconsidered their ultimate preoccupations once again and selected social identities on the basis of these reassessed preoccupations:

> The first two or three years, I just kept my head low [avoided criminal activity] and I'd say to myself, I dunno . . . But now, it's different. I can clearly see the alternatives, and I know I want to stay outside and maintain a family life, not live as a criminal. But you gotta get a taste of this other life [non-criminal] before you can choose . . . really. —Nathan.

> I want a quiet life. I want to see my grand-children grow. I wasn't there for my own children. I don't want this life anymore. The first two or three years, I still had bad ideas. I even grabbed the door knob thinking "one last . . . one last big one," but then I would think of my grand-children and . . . no . . . I can't lose them for another stupid thing [crime]. No, I can tell you, it really is over for me. I am done. —Ivan

A contrario, the assessment of constraints may steer some offenders toward the abandonment of their desistance project, thereby reinitiating the cycle by personifying their offender role. Such reversal may explain, at first glance, the zigzag criminal careers (i.e., criminal careers punctuated with lulls) reported in the literature (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Piquero, 2004). As an example of the latter case, Kevin details how he is considering going back to a criminal lifestyle:

> I've lived this [criminal] life since I was 13 years old. When I started, it made me feel appreciated. I was someone. So I went all the way in it. Today it's what I miss the most: recognition. For a while, I tried to fit in. But now, I am beginning to think: "was it my destiny"? [Interviewer: Do you think you might commit a crime again?]. Probably, yes. There is no point denying it. But you know, I would do only minor things, nothing serious . . . I don't feel I am alive at the moment. I know it isn't right . . . for the victims and all . . . but I feel like I am losing my personality, you know? I've always wanted to be a criminal. So . . . how??? How??? You know, I've tried for the last 2 years to stay clean. I still try. It's not

so bad . . . and I am not asking for much. A job? I got one. A house? I don't need one. But having a girlfriend? Being with my daughter? I want somebody to rely on . . . —Kevin

Kevin's struggle does not mean that he would not desist in the future, but rather that he must better evaluate or objectively locate more facilitators to reach his goal of desistance. This fact also may explain why change processes are not linear: More than one passage in the morphogenetic cycle is generally necessary before a perceptible change can be observed from an empirical perspective (Maruna et al., 2004). It is safe to assume that offenders will profess to be eager to "go straight" (Burnett & Maruna, 2004) more than once before actually managing to do so.

Discussion

An Integrated Approach to Desistance

Most offenders desist at some point. Although it appears to be difficult to shed "criminal" social identities, it is unlikely that offenders would hold on to them indefinitely. The structural, relational, and agency constraints are numerous, and the structural facilitators (e.g., monetary gain) or relational facilitators (e.g., status within the offender group) may be reassessed as less important compared with other ultimate preoccupations such as living in peace and harmony (Shover, 1996). This may explain partially why a majority of offenders emphasize their wish to "go straight" (Burnett & Maruna, 2004). However, contrary to Maruna (1998, 2001, 2004) who argues that narrative scripts determine whether or not offenders desist, the morphogenetic perspective allows that it is rather the involuntary placement within the social structure, the vested interests, and the opportunity costs that exert a force over offenders and make the desistance project *accessible* only to some of them. In the same way, the assessment of the constraints and the structural, relational, and agency facilitators that offenders encounter only allow some of them to fulfill their desistance projects. Consequently, desistance cannot be reduced to a decision made by the agent on the basis of her/his narrative script.

That being said, desistance is not the result of a good thing happening to a "bad" actor (Laub et al., 1998, p. 237). Although access to social capital appears to favor desistance (Barry, 2006; Farrall, 2002; Laub & Sampson 2001, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993, 2003), there is no automatism guaranteeing that offenders will abandon their criminal activities. It appears likely that adopting new social identities (e.g., as a father, a worker, a soldier) is not associated with the cessation of "criminal" social identities since the latter still may be quite embedded into one's personal identity. Therefore, these new social identities may be regarded as less important than the offender's social identity. Perhaps this fact contributes to explaining why "turning points" or "social identities" that guarantee desistance are difficult to identify. The perspective put forth by Archer (2000, 2002) compels us to analyze the role of identities from an original angle: rather than conjecturing which social identities most often are associated with desistance, the aim is now to understand how an offender's

personal identity changes in contact with "new social identities" (which can be assumed again), and how this heartens offenders to abandon ultimately their criminal social identity. The process of desistance therefore could be encapsulated as follows:

> **Stage 1**: To initiate the process of desistance, opportunities (Maruna, 1998, 2001) or "hooks for change" (Giordano et al., 2002) that can counterbalance offenders' unprivileged position within the structure must be present in the environment. Without openings, desistance cannot occur (Structure opening)
>
> **Stage 2**: Social identities must be (re)endorsed, voluntarily or not, by offenders as the personification of such social identities will, inevitably, modify one's personal identity (Structure → Agent)
>
> **Stage 3**: The ultimate concerns, which ground personal identity, have to change so the desister no longer sees himself as a "criminal" but rather as a "contributor" to the structure such as self-identifying as an employee, a voter, etc. (Agent → Structure)

In summary, our data indicate that the initiation of the desistance process comes from the structure. Without possibilities to rectify their lives, no offender could desist. These possibilities inspire some offenders to take on new social identities. At this stage, probation officers and family relatives play a pivotal role as they may help offenders recognize the "hooks for change" that are present in their environment or, said differently, correct their "map of society." Even though offenders may be reluctant or under-motivated at this point, it should not lessen their efforts toward desistance since changes need to be envisaged in a long-term perspective. Finally, it is on the last stage of the desistance process that agency is needed to maintain desistance. It is ultimately when offenders have been able to successfully endorse one or more prosocial identities (as father, husband, employee, etc.) that they must resolve that "deviance is unacceptable from that point forward" (Giordano et al., 2002, p. 1053), and abandon their criminal social identities.

Conclusion and Future Research Directions

Our data indicate that personal identities change at a much slower pace than social identities. For our respondents, this process lasted approximately 4 years. The majority emphasized that in the first 2 years of their "going straight," they deemed it impossible to abandon crime. At that particular time, they would have been characterized as adopting a script of condemnation. Conversely, we are left to wonder whether some "redempters" (Maruna, 1998, 2001) are not, in fact, "optimists" (Farrall, 2002) as a similar proportion of optimists and pessimists reoffend over a longer period of observation (Farrall, 2002). Therefore, it is suggested that future research concentrate on offenders who have ceased criminal activities for a period of 4 years to limit the possibility of identifying false positives/negatives. As pointed out earlier, it would be

appropriate also to conduct longitudinal studies with a closer focus on how and when social identities modify personal identity within the process of desistance. It would further be interesting to contrast the desistance of offenders from underprivileged backgrounds with that of offenders from privileged backgrounds. Considering the importance of individuals' initial structural position in the process of desistance, it is safe to assume that their desistance could be different. Likewise, it would be noteworthy to contrast respondents on the basis of the sentence they receive (e.g., probation, conditional sentence, imprisonment) to better grasp whether the nature of the sentence influences offenders' access to structural openings (i.e., hook for change, social capital). Finally, even with the use of appropriate precautions to get a maximum variation sample in order to test our approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28) and to use "informant feedback" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, pp. 275-277) to validate our analysis to maximize transferability (Miles & Huberman, 2007), qualitative methods still present limitations as they are centered on the depth of data instead of on their breadth (Patton, 1990). Nevertheless, such depth garnered promising findings that substantiate the relevance of furthering research on desistance using Margaret Archer's sociological approach to the morphogenesis and morphostasis of social structures, culture, and agents.

Notes

1. The group studied by the Gluecks reached adulthood between 1942 and 1950, and the vast majority served in the army during either World War II or the Korean War. According to Sampson and Laub (1993), military experience enabled some respondents to begin a process of desistance. However, because few studies have supported the positive influence of a military career on desistance (Bouffard & Laub, 2004), and because this influence can only be studied among groups who have lived during the same historical period, the effects of a military career will not be considered here due to space constraints.
2. For example, the "Montreal Two-Samples Longitudinal Study" (MTSLS) saw its sample decrease from 470 respondents in 1974-1975 to 160 in 2007 (Morizot & Le Blanc, 2007).
3. This definition was developed following Bourdieu (1986), Bazemore and Erbe (2004), Coleman (1988), and Putnam (1995).

4. Informal social control refers to the norm-enforcing social forces that produce conformity in the community but that do not derive from the state's strength. Conversely, formal social control refers to the state's involvement in causing people to respect the norms (Hunter, 1985).

5. Sampson and Laub (1993) and Laub and Sampson (2003) did not study this form of social control, but several studies belonging to this perspective have and are thus included here.

6. The narrative script refers to the way in which individuals express the goals, motivations, and emotions guiding their actions to make these actions understandable: "People tell stories about what they do and why they did it" (Maruna, 1998, p. 33).

7. Judges may decide to add additional months to the current maximum of 24 months less a day for additional convictions.

8. The code overlap is the most stringent criterion of agreement since it requires that coders agree on the presence, frequency, spread, and location of each code. Three adjustment techniques are used by QDA Miner to correct for the chance factor: free marginal adjustment, Scott's pi adjustment, and Krippendorff's alpha.

9. Margaret Archer is one prominent theorist of critical realism (Kivinen & Piiroinen, 2006). The sociological approach she promotes to understand the mechanisms of the transformation (morphogenesis) and maintenance (morphostasis) of social structures, culture, and agents is contained in four monographs: *The Morphogenetic Approach* (Archer, 1995); *Culture and Agency* (Archer, 1996); *Being Human: The Problem of Agency* (Archer, 2000); and *Structure, Agency and Internal Conversation* (Archer, 2003).

10. Two mechanisms are available whereby agents may participate in the structure's morphogenesis/morphostasis: (1) by virtue of number (simply because of their existence) or (2) by joining other agents. Thus, the agent alone has no power to change the structure.

11. For critical realists, the social structure is visible through the institutional relations existing among agents, which they define as the "group of actions and interactions that are repeated and recursive over time (. . .) and submitted to rules and normative conventions" (Vandenberghe, 2007, p. 505).

12. Reflexivity is "the ability to perceive oneself as the only person who is able to think about oneself in the first person, and to recognize that one is the subject of thoughts from other people and that other people are the subject of one's thoughts" (Rudder Baker, 1998, p. 331, quoted in Archer, 2003, p. 40)

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