

---

## VISITING EXPERTS' PAPERS

---

### HOW OFFENDERS TRANSFORM THEIR LIVES

*Bonita M. Veysey, Ph.D.\**



#### I. INTRODUCTION

Today I will be presenting current research on desistance with a focus on how people with criminal records shed their “criminal” self-perception and lifestyle. I would like to begin this discussion with acknowledging that I have an unusual perspective toward “criminality” and, therefore, toward desistance from crime. For purposes of full disclosure, I would also like to say two things. First, I do not believe that some people are born “criminals” or are, in any way, predestined biologically or socially to be criminally inclined. Nor are people who engage in behaviors for which they might be arrested and thus called “criminal” necessarily deviant and clearly are not deviant in all aspects of their lives. It is important to remember that “criminal” is a social construct and a legal process — not a characteristic. Second, I do not know, and therefore cannot say, how much of the US experience can be directly applied to Japan or other nations represented here. At this time, the US is a deeply divided society with vast economic disparities between the very rich and the rest of the society. We are divided as much by class as by race. Currently, the US incarcerates 1 in 99 adults; the highest incarceration rate of any nation on earth. For African-American men, one in three can expect to spend time in jail or prison. This kind of mass incarceration creates, in essence, a new permanent underclass that is excluded from many institutions of social mobility by virtue of a criminal record. Society’s willingness to give former offenders a true second chance is extremely limited. Most non-offending Americans have no idea how hard it is for many who have criminal records simply to make ends meet, and, even if they did understand, they protest every perceived advantage that prisoners, parolees or probationers receive, including health care, substance abuse treatment, housing, and education. In American society, there is no such thing as “paying your debt to society” through serving a sentence. Once convicted, the status follows the person throughout his or her life, limiting opportunities for housing, government financial support, employment, and voting rights. However, even more damaging are the social assumptions associated with criminality, including stereotypes of dangerousness and untrustworthiness. These perceptions of criminality may be a more essential problem for individuals trying to shed a negative identity as criminal than any structural or legal barrier.

Given the vast numbers of people currently being released from jail and prison to their home communities, understanding desistance from crime *must* be a critical priority. Understanding the “who, how and in what context” are the practical concerns of probation and parole and are the foundational questions of research on desistance across the life course. Research to date has repeatedly demonstrated the age-crime relationship, correlates of desistance, and even some interpersonal and intrapersonal mechanisms that appear to operate in the desistance process. Research further suggests that identity and sense of self may be central to these latter processes. In this presentation I will discuss the current state of knowledge on desistance from crime and explore how identity processes may inform our understanding of this complex issue.

#### II. DEFINITIONS AND CHALLENGES

I would like to start with definitions and challenges. First, what constitutes a criminal? Technically, this is someone who has broken the law, been apprehended, prosecuted and convicted. But I don’t think that is whom we are really interested in. I want you to think about this. Is a person a criminal if she shoplifts once from a store, gets caught, but never does anything illegal again? What about people who break the law repeatedly, but never get caught? Are they criminals? How about the person who is wrong-

---

\*Professor, School of Criminal Justice, Rutgers University-Newark, Center for Law and Justice, 123 Washington Street, Newark, NJ 07866.

fully convicted, is he a criminal? In our imaginations, I believe we know what a criminal looks and acts like. Who we define or believe is a criminal is critical to how we understand desistance. For example, can the person who committed one crime desist from crime? Can a wrongfully convicted person who spends 20 years in prison for a crime he did not commit desist? In the first case, the shoplifter can probably continue her conventional life without serious interruption. The man who spent 20 years in prison has come to understand himself, willing or not, as a criminal — as has society. His challenge to live a conventional pro-social lifestyle will be much more similar to those he was incarcerated with than the shoplifter's.

Second, there is an underlying assumption that “criminals” behave in a criminal fashion *all* the time. This is simply not the case. First, criminal acts are episodic-not continuous. Criminals, therefore, spend most of their time in non-criminal activities. Even those who live a so-called “criminal lifestyle” behave in a conventional manner outside of their criminal activities even when they are known to their communities to be criminals and they themselves have adopted a criminal identity. For example, a drug dealer may also be an active member of her family — a daughter and a sister — love to read and listen to music, and go to college during the evening hours. This is important to remember, because for people to change they must have pro-social alternatives. If individuals have a broad repertoire of both criminal and non-criminal activities and identities, they are more able to shift into a stable conventional identity.

The third definitional challenge is the concept of desistance, itself. As defined by Mulvey and his colleagues, “Desistance is a decline over time in some behavior of interest.” Desistance, as a construct, applies to any behavior; criminal or non-criminal, positive or negative. Understood this way, desistance from crime, as a process, should have the same basic characteristics as desistance from any other negative behavior. It is understood that desistance is comprised of a specific behavior change (for example, a reduction in offending or ceasing to commit crime). Sustained behavior change, however, often requires substantial changes in other aspects of an individual's life, including cognitions and attitudes, identity and its attendant roles, daily activities, and the membership of his or her social networks. It is important to distinguish these two elements. Laub and Sampson, in fact, claim that ‘termination’ is the point when criminal activity stops and ‘desistance’ is the underlying causal process. This is consistent with the Maruna and Farrall's use of the terms primary and secondary desistance. Primary desistance requires the cessation of the behavior, but secondary desistance is founded upon the creation of a pro-social replacement identity with new cognitions and attitudes, new social roles and social networks. These ideas distinguish between the absence of criminal behavior and the adoption of a pro-social lifestyle.

Finally, and related to the previous point, the fact is that most desistance studies investigate factors related to a non-event (that is, the absence of criminal behavior). They often measure successful desistance by the absence of a new arrest or incarceration or of self-reported criminal activity. Many critics take issue with this characterization of desistance. Questions arise, such as, “what if the follow up period just wasn't long enough?” or “what if the measures don't capture the true behavior?” The methodological problems associated with measuring and making generalizations from a non-event, particularly a low base rate event, are well known. If we are serious about desistance, we must focus our attention on secondary desistance and create methodologies based upon the predicted *presence* of observable indicators.

### III. STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

At this time, desistance research has amassed a substantial body of knowledge through quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods approaches. I would like to spend a few minutes summarizing what we know.

Desistance over the life course represents a complicated set of issues, and research to date has demonstrated several persistent findings often with conflicting theoretical explanations for those findings. According to Laub and Sampson, there are four persistent empirical findings that must be accommodated by any theory of desistance (or persistence for that matter) over the life course: (1) the prevalence of criminal participation declines with age (this is the age-crime curve; most crimes are committed by people between the ages of 14 and 24), (2) the incidence of crime does not necessarily decline with age (that is, some people commit crimes at a high rate over their whole lives), (3) there is substantial continuity over the life course of criminal behavior (that is, there is persistent offending from delinquency through adult crime), and (4) there is also substantial variation in criminal behavior over the life course (that is, not all

delinquents continue into adult crime nor do all adult criminals have delinquent pasts).

There is general agreement that crime declines with age. This is true at the macro level, but is not necessarily so within individuals or within certain crime types. Most individuals desist in early adulthood, although some continue to commit crimes throughout life. Many theories have been proposed to explain these findings, including developmental, maturational, biological, life course, routine activities, rational choice and social control among others. Each of these suggests that as people age, they also age out of crime. Some theories suggest that cessation from crime is associated with psychological/emotional maturation and physical aging. Others, such as Sampson and Laub's life course perspective, suggest that normal developmental processes account for much of the cessation in early adulthood. Processes that reflect transitions from childhood to adulthood **and** from delinquent to conventional citizen include transitions from peer dominated relationships to spouse or other stable romantic relationship, engagement in long-term, stable employment, and in some studies, recovery from addictions.

[As an aside, it might be argued that delinquency and crime in youth may reflect normal teenage behavior. Prosecuting them may do more harm than good. Most teenagers age out of this type of behavior by their early 20s. Prosecuting them may severely limit their opportunities for the future, increasing the probability that they will continue to commit crimes for economic gains and identity needs.]

This substantial body of knowledge confirms the age-crime relationship as well as the consistent correlates of desistance. What is less well understood are the *mechanisms* by which individuals stop offending. Many large-scale quantitative studies repeatedly find a relationship between, among other things, employment and marriage and desistance. When trying to unpack *how* these events might affect specific behavior, researchers argue that these events reflect several control mechanisms; specifically, that the spouse or job provides: (1) social control via attachment to and surveillance by pro-social others, (2) routine schedules and activities that fill up the days and limit unstructured time, and (3) new relationships with people who reinforce pro-social behavior and limit time with antisocial peers.

Quantitative studies have identified important correlates of desistance, but, due to the nature of the inquiry, are limited in their ability to describe the *mechanisms* by which desistance occurs. For this type of explanation, more detailed and nuanced studies of desistance experiences and the meanings applied to them must be conducted. At this time, some of the most promising studies on the mechanisms of desistance are qualitative. They are commonly based upon retrospective narratives focused on the inter- and intra-personal dynamics of desistance and on life circumstances with a particular emphasis on how individuals change from criminal lifestyles to sustained, pro-social, conventional ones.

I want to begin by briefly discussing arguably the most comprehensive study of desistance and persistence over the life course. Published in the book, *Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives*, Laub and Sampson used a mixed method design to collect and analyze quantitative and qualitative data collected from men who participated in Glueck and Glueck's longitudinal study of 7 to 10 year old male delinquents; painstakingly searching for these men sixty years later. Three groups of men were identified: (1) desisters; those who had no arrests for any serious crime as an adult, (2) persisters; those who were arrested multiple times over the life course, and (3) an intermediate group that had "zigzag criminal careers" including late life offending, intermittent offending, or late life desisting.

Desisters stopped offending early in life. Reflecting on the past, they make no excuses for their early behavior. For the most part, they grew up to be conventional adults and are exceptionally proud of their accomplishments, particularly given what they had to overcome. This group is also characterized by "generativity." That is, they have worked and are working to make things better for the next generation. They have given back to society through military service and altruistic endeavors, such as opening their homes to foster children. Despite poverty, lack of education and troubled childhoods, these former delinquents got out of a life of crime primarily through three structural turning points; marriage, military service and/or work. Importantly, Laub and Sampson claim that desistance is more than a maturational process. It is not simply the effect of aging and emotional maturity, but what happens to these men in terms of daily routines, responsibility to and for others (e.g., wives and children), and how time spent in these activities and new relationships limit opportunities for negative peer interactions and illegal behavior.

Laub and Sampson describe two mechanisms that appear to operate in the desistance process. First, narratives of desistance often describe an experience of “knifing off” the offender from his immediate environments and peers and family. Through marriage, military service, or moving from the neighborhoods, individuals separated themselves from the influences that got them into trouble. Second, Laub and Sampson also described another element in the desistance process that they call, “structured role stability.” They describe this as, “a daily routine that provided both structure and meaningful activity.” The men in the study often commented on how important their families were to them and the meaningfulness of their role as father, husband and provider. Likewise, employment sometimes gave men an identity and sense of pride in that identity. Marriage and work were recognized by the respondents to provide both social support and informal social control. Even given these situational changes in life, much of the desistance is attributed to personal agency. The men in the study often described the choices they made along the way and underscored the will, commitment and hard work necessary to change.

While desisters and persisters share the same childhood risk factors, they travelled very different paths. As a general statement, persisters are not connected. They have long histories of incarceration, job and residential instability, failure in marriage and family life, and histories of alcoholism. They lacked close relationships and consistent structure over their life span. Like the desisters, however, this group of men also expressed personal agency and responsibility for their actions and choices. What is critical to note is that at least some of both desisters and persisters had alcohol problems, had married or served in the military. And, in fact, the elements of social control in marriage, employment and the military to have an effect on reducing criminal behavior whenever they occur over the lifespan. However, the difference between these groups is that people who are likely to fail at their jobs and in their marriages are also those who are likely to recidivate. People who have the personality characteristics that make them successful in marriage and work are also likely to be able to find and maintain conventional lifestyles-free of crime.

Laub and Sampson point to the possibility that how one sees and values oneself is an important component of desistance. Many qualitative studies have provided insight into particular inter- and intra-personal dynamics of desistance, including the importance of cognitive shifts, identity transformations, decision-making and human agency, and interpersonal expectations in the desistance process. There is some consistency across these studies that suggest that a trigger or event often occurs that begins the process, some cognitive change in self-understanding occurs early or late in the process, and that a supportive network of people and meaningful things to do are needed to encourage and/or sustain a pro-social life.

I would like to highlight just a couple of these studies.

Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph, in a landmark, longitudinal, mixed method study, investigated the role of cognitions in the desistance process. They were particularly interested in understanding the thinking behind and the meaning assigned to traditional structural factors, such as marriage and employment, in individuals’ move toward a pro-social lifestyle.

They proposed a theory of cognitive transformation that is comprised of four cognitive steps: (1) openness to change, (2) increased recognition of the desirability of change described as ‘hooks for change’, (3) being able to envision and begin to fashion an appealing and conventional ‘replacement self,’ and (4) changes in the way the individual perceives crime or a criminal lifestyle. These cognitive changes build one upon another and are related to external action. They summarize, stating, “the desistance process can be seen as relatively complete when the actor no longer sees these same [criminal] behaviors as positive, viable, or even personally relevant.”

While most of the people in the study were extremely disadvantaged, the authors note that the respondents displayed a great degree of variation in their commitment to change, the types of ‘hooks for change’ they identify and the uses they make of them, and whether the effects were immediate or delayed. Openness to change was strikingly different for the respondents. Some had well-articulated future oriented plans while others seemed stuck or reluctant or had only a vague notion. Hooks for change included prison or treatment experiences, religion, children, and marriage/relationships. Similar to other studies, these hooks were complicated and did not necessarily follow the predictions of social control theories.

159TH INTERNATIONAL SENIOR SEMINAR  
VISITING EXPERTS' PAPERS

Giordano and her colleagues note an important caveat in their description of capacity for change. They note that some people coming from prison have substantial social capital and do not need any assistance in their desistance process. You may know, for example, that Piper Kerman, who wrote *Orange is the New Black*, chronicling her 14-month incarceration in federal prison, had an excellent education, a good job, a loving family and a devoted fiancé when she was arrested and subsequently imprisoned. The moment she walked out the prison gates, she had ... an excellent education, a good job, a loving family and a devoted fiancé. She literally picked up where she left off AND she was even able to benefit financially from her "criminal" experience through her memoir and now the Netflix series of the same title based loosely upon events in the book. Very few people who pass through prison can claim to do this. On the other extreme, some people have little or no social capital. No friends with resources or connections who could help them find housing or a job, no remaining family ties, little or no education or employment experience or even skills. They leave prison with serious health issues and unaddressed addictions. For these individuals, the barriers are virtually insurmountable and there is little any institution can do to fill the void. It is the middle group that can most benefit from emotional, social and instrumental supports and who are also the most likely to make dramatic changes in their identities and day to day behaviors.

Similar in content, Sommers, Baskin and Fagan conducted a study of the desistance process for violent female offenders. All of the women were deeply embedded in street life having serious substance abuse problems, and using all their resources as well as committing crimes to support their addictions. They had ties only to others in the same lifestyle with virtually no connections to conventional persons or institutions.

In analyzing the stories of the respondents, the authors identify three themes as key aspects of the desistance process for women: (1) resolving to stop, (2) breaking away from the life, and (3) maintaining a conventional life. Fear of dying in the streets, fear of incarceration, despair and isolation (mostly from children and family) were cited as reasons for the resolve to stop. Having made this initial step, the women reported going through a difficult transitional period where they repeatedly had to make and remake the decision to abstain from drug use. At this point, they had to decide how to establish and maintain conventional relationships and what to do with themselves and their lives. Most commonly through professional help (for example, residential drug treatment), they got off the streets and began to create new social relationships and new identities.

Creating and maintaining a conventional life was difficult, since most had burned bridges with family and friends. Treatment programs provided support for the initial steps, but long-term change occurred after treatment. The authors state, "In the course of experiencing relationships with conventional others and participating in conventional roles, the women developed a strong social-psychological commitment not to return to crime and drug use. These commitments most often revolved around renewed affiliations with their children, relationships with new friends, and the acquisition of educational and vocational skills."

In a similar vein, in one of the Teeside studies, respondents described a sense of "fragility" that comes with reorienting their purpose. Shedding an accustomed life for one that is unknown is very difficult. The participants reported that desisting from crime largely involved acknowledging the effects of their criminal behavior, reorienting/reinterpreting how those events can be used to forge a non-criminal lifestyle and non-criminal identity, and how positive ties with individuals in their close network can affirm their motivation to desist from crime. However, these changes come at a substantial cost. Particularly challenging was the "knifing off" of past relationships, stigmatization and staying clean and sober. Even with a commitment to change, life events, such as a death in the family or the loss of a job, can send the individual spiraling back to his or her former lifestyle.

The other primary theorist and researcher in the desistance arena is Shadd Maruna. He has contributed several concepts to this field, including (1) "making good" and "the good life" framework, (2) outcomes based on redemption and condemnation scripts (and other narrative styles), and (3) the innovative use of Cooley's 'looking glass self' in his discussion of the so-called Pygmalion and Golem effects.

Maruna's book, *Making Good*, provides an in-depth discussion of desistance, building on Matza's concept of drift into and out of criminal activity and highlighting the dynamic aspects of both criminality and desistance. Maruna argues that desistance has traditionally been conceptualized as an abrupt



cessation of criminal behavior. One problem with this notion is that given that crime itself is sporadic, with considerable “drift” into and out of periods of offending, termination may be a continual process. Instead, Maruna states, “desistance might more productively be defined as the long-term abstinence from crime among individuals who had previously engaged in persistent patterns of criminal offending.” This conceptualization allows for desistance to unfold as a process that involves maintenance of a crime-free life.

Maruna’s study finds important distinctions in the life narratives of persisters and desisters. The persisters write a “condemnation script” that is fatalistic, suggesting their life course was determined for them by outside forces from the time they were young. These offenders tended to focus on childhood events, such as poor treatment from parents or sexual abuse, as defining moments in their lives. This emphasis on the past can be detrimental to the sense of agency and focus on the future that is a critical component of desistance. While the persisters in the study reported that they were tired of offending and wanted to change their lives, they felt powerless to change their behavior because of drug dependency, poverty, a lack of education or skills, or prejudice. This deterministic condemnation script is both an explanation for persistence, and a cognitive reinforcement that positive change is unlikely. The persisters lack self-efficacy and agency, and create a feedback loop in which they put themselves in situations that reinforce their victim mentality.

In contrast to the persisters, the desisters create a narrative Maruna calls a “redemption script” focused on explaining how the person got to where they were as an offender, and why and how they are changing their lives. The script provides a level of continuity in the self-narrative, even as people change from their past selves. There are several dimensions to the redemption script, as Maruna relates, which, “begins by establishing the goodness and conventionality of the narrator—a victim of society who gets involved with crime and drugs to achieve some sort of power over otherwise bleak circumstances....Yet, with the help of some outside force, someone who ‘believed in’ the ex-offender, the narrator is able to accomplish what he or she was ‘always meant to do’...Newly empowered, he or she now also seeks to ‘give something back’ to society as a display of gratitude.”

Maruna calls this process “making good,” which entails claiming one’s prior negative experiences as a source of strength, and finding ways to redeem oneself by giving back. This generativity is a critical part of the process exhibited by new ways of thinking and behaviors that demonstrate and reinforce the former offender’s new identity. Acknowledgment of the transformation by significant people in the former offender’s life is also important, and can be affirmed through “redemption rituals.”

Continuing in this vein, Maruna incorporates findings from the psychology literature on explanatory styles to examine the psychological mindset that seemed to best support efforts to ‘go straight’ and maintain a desistance from crime. The work draws from psychological theories about explanatory style, that is, a person’s tendency to offer similar sorts of explanations for different events in their life narrative. Explanatory styles have three components: (1) internality vs. externality (i.e., the causal agent is self or other), (2) stability vs. instability (i.e., duration is constant or short-lived), and (3) globality vs. specificity (the effects affect all aspects or just one area of life). In psychology, explanatory styles are predictive of depression with those whose negative event attribution is internal, stable and global.

Maruna proposes that explanatory styles can be applied in the same fashion to desistance. This research hypothesizes that active and former offenders differ in explanatory style in the same ways that depressives and non-depressives differ. He states, “Desisting ex-offenders should therefore view positive events as the product of more internal, stable, and global causes (that is, ‘because I am a good person deep down’) and negative events as the product of more external, unstable and specific causes (for example, ‘That was just a phase I was going through,’ or ‘That wasn’t the ‘real me,’ it just happened’).”

Maruna found that desisters tended to attribute the cause of negative events to those outside oneself. More importantly, desisters tended to have explanatory styles that attributed positive events to the self, that the cause is permanent and will affect all aspects of life (that is, internal, stable, global). He concludes by suggesting that interventions should focus less on criminogenic thinking (explanatory styles of *persisters*) and more on the stability and globality aspects of explanatory styles of *desisters*.

Maruna and colleagues extended their examination of desistance from crime using the “looking-glass self” concept. They used data from focus groups of clients and counselors (many of whom were in recovery and/or had graduated from the program themselves) in a housing and employment program for ex-offenders. The primary goal of the study was to explore how counselors’ and other authorities’ positive assessments of client change create a Pygmalion-type effect. In essence, the “reformed identity” of persons in the desistance process is concretely recognized (often in an official process) and this reaffirms and solidifies the new identity.

The authors found that both counselors and clients in the program had a difficult time articulating what constitutes “successful” reform, giving responses that may be summarized by “you know it when you see it” suggesting that it is not *what one does*, but *who one is*. The authors found evidence of the Pygmalion effect insofar as people do report that they rely on testimonies from respectable others to confirm they have changed. They often use these new labels to override previous deviant labels. Further, people who were doing well were given responsibilities in the program. These clients also reported that “being trusted with additional responsibility over others” was profoundly transforming.

However, the authors state that reform is more than a passive re-labeling process. They assert that self-conceptions are built on the experience of ‘self as a causal agent’ as well as the reactions of others. Their data confirm this active role. Clients displayed motivation to change, described a “calling” in which they find meaning and purpose outside of crime that was unique to each individual, and found satisfaction in giving back. The authors conclude by emphasizing that individual change and societal reactions are both required for ex-offenders to be truly reintegrated into society.

Finally, Paternoster and Bushway add to the conversation on identity transformation and role replacement in the desistance process. They suggest that identity transformation is at the heart of why some individuals choose to separate themselves from a criminal identity even in the absence of a replacement identity. They suggest that the cognitive reflection on a potential self, imagining either a positive identity or distancing oneself from a negative ‘feared’ self, provides the necessary impetus to begin the desistance process. This theoretical piece embeds some of the key concepts of identity theory into a substantial criminological problem and integrates the concepts of some of the most prominent scholars of desistance discussed earlier. While there are variations among them, all of these theorists have suggested that a shift in a person’s sense of self is required. Some suggest that a cognitive shift in self-understanding is key, others stress identity and narrative transformations, while yet others stress the importance of the self in interaction.

#### **IV. IDENTITY AND IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION**

I would like to finish today with a discussion of identity processes and models of identity transformation.

Throughout the literature on the criminal life course, it is clear that identity and identity processes are central not only to the choice and maintenance of a criminal lifestyle, but more importantly to how people select and maintain new lifestyles. In 1988, Charles Tittle published an article entitled, “Two empirical regularities (maybe) in search of an explanation: Commentary on the age/crime debate,” in which he proposed two possible theories (specifically, labeling and social control) that could explain both the drastic reduction in crime participation in the late teens to early twenties as well as the consistently high rates of offending of a small subset of individuals over the life course. Interestingly, Tittle’s description and application of labeling theory to these “two empirical regularities” in the age/crime debate are consistent with much of the more recent work on criminal identity.

Criminal identity is thought to be one of the drivers of criminal participation, and the shedding or replacement of the criminal identity is believed to be necessary for long-term desistance. In regard to the role of a criminal identity, for example, in the 90s both Shover and Little conducted qualitative studies of criminal behavior and identity. In both of these studies, the self-characterization of “criminal” plays a central role in criminal behavior. In a similar vein, Brezina and Topalli explored what propels individuals into criminal careers arguing that criminal self-efficacy defined as individuals’ beliefs that they are “good” criminals may explain why some continue to offend despite arrest or other setbacks. Further, Brezina and

Topalli speculated that criminal self-efficacy is tied to criminal identity; particularly to the degree that individuals describe their involvement in criminal behavior as a successful role.

The operationalization of criminal identity also has received some attention, particularly among social psychologists. For example, the elements of social identity; (1) cognitive centrality — that is, the importance one places on being a member of a particular group, (2) in-group affect — the emotional connection to the group, and (3) in-group ties — the perception of similarities of self with in-group members; has been applied to a criminal social identity. The studies suggest that a criminal identity is formed through a complex developmental process that results in the increased probability of association with criminal and delinquent peers. It is in this association that members of a criminal group achieve a sense of self-consistency through a manifestation of their new identity in terms of criminal behavior; an idea that is consistent with much of the criminology research.

Consistent with social identity theory, it is also critical to note that individuals have multiple social identities. Every human being acts out of multiple identities, including large social group identities, such as sex and culture, as well as relational identities, such as daughter, spouse, and acquired identities, such as college student, probation officer and criminal. Some identities are positively valued and some, like criminal or addict, are negatively valued. Some identities are obvious and some may be hidden. Identities come with shared behavioral expectations, including how one dresses, conducts him- or herself, interacts and communicates with others, and what activities the individual engages in. The primary identity that one acts from is largely dependent on situational context (that is, if a person is sitting in a classroom, the identity most likely to be invoked is one of 'student') and, to some degree, what identity is most valued. Theoretically, it is only when the *criminal* identity is prominent that criminal behavior is likely. The prominence of a given identity within an individual's hierarchy of identities may vary by situation or repeated enactment of the associated role. Therefore, a criminal identity may be activated by the presence of criminal others or when reminded of this identity even in the absence of criminal peers. In particular, experience with and exposure to prison environments and criminal others reinforces and strengthens criminal identity as does individuals' perceptions of others' attitudes and beliefs toward their "criminal" identities.

This is true of all identities. Close contact with others in a shared identity and reminders of one's identity reinforce and strengthen the identity and all of its associated behaviors, attitudes and beliefs. For example, a father who spends time with his family and children receives not only continuous explicit and implicit feedback that he is a father, but every time he sees a picture of a father with a child, his own fatherhood is re-affirmed. Remembering that criminals have multiple identities, too, the question is how can other pro-social identities take priority in someone's life so that the prominence of the criminal identity is replaced?

Now, if you think carefully about all of the material I have covered so far, it should be clear that these research findings could easily be transported into any other situation in which an individual is willingly or unwillingly associated with a stigmatized group, be it groups with titles such as the mentally ill, addicts and alcoholics, the disabled, or even the divorced. And given the substantial overlap in prison, mental health and substance abuse populations, it is important to consider how central a role identity can play in reform, recovery and wellness. Like the criminal, these are statuses that are resisted and often hidden where possible. The association to these groups implies a personal social failure. Arguably, the process of identity transformation for each of these groups is similar.

I would like to propose another one that is similar and has been used to describe the identity transformation process for people with mental illnesses, addictions and criminal histories. I would further argue that this is a general model describing any human transformation. It begins with the basic requirements that will allow for change to occur, including satisfaction of basic needs (for example, housing, clothing, food) and emotional and physical safety. No one can make substantial changes in their lives if their time is consumed with meeting survival needs.

The first critical component is empowering relationships. This is the linchpin of redemption, recovery and wellness. This is essentially the effect of the looking glass self, gazing through another's eyes at the human value and positive possibilities of the self — where consistent positive regard may be interpreted



by the individual, sometimes for the first time, that he or she is deserving of love and belonging. Being in this relationship gives people the confidence and courage to explore new roles and their attendant skills. Often, when someone has been involved with the correctional or treatment systems, his or her breadth of possible roles has been reduced to a very few, and he or she is generally characterized by his or her status as an offender, addict or psychiatric patient. Taking on new roles that are valued by society, such as student, employee, volunteer, or advocate, is the first step in assuming a new identity. Taking on a new role also means that the individual must learn the skills necessary to be successful in that role, including personal, educational, vocational and interpersonal skills. Further, the assumption of valued roles and skills development build self-esteem and self-efficacy. Experiences in positive relationships and the development and practice of new skills and roles change the way people view themselves and their own histories. This leads directly to recontextualization that we define as the ability of individuals to reframe their experiences and redefine themselves through a new life narrative. These last three components, valued social roles, skills development, and recontextualization, are at the heart of identity transformation. A new person rises from the proverbial ashes using their past negative experiences as wisdom and sources of strength as well as a way to recast their narrative toward a meaningful life through giving back and as a way to justify their right to a fresh start.

### References Cited

- Asencio, E.K. (2011). Familiarity, legitimation, and frequency: The influence of others on the criminal self-view. *Sociological Inquiry* 8:34-52.
- Asencio, E.K., & Burke, P.J. (2011). Does incarceration change the criminal identity? A synthesis of labeling and identity theory perspectives on identity change. *Sociological Perspectives* 54:163-182.
- Boduszek, D., Adamson, G., Shevlin, M., Mallett, J., & Hyland, P. (2013). Criminal social identity of recidivistic prisoners: The role of self-esteem, family and criminal friends. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology* 28:15-25.
- Boduszek, D., & Hyland, P. (2011). The theoretical model of criminal social identity: Psycho-social perspective. *International Journal of Criminology and Sociological Theory* 4:604-15.
- Brezina, T., & Topalli, V. (2012). Criminal self-efficacy: Exploring the correlates and consequences of a "successful criminal" identity. *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 39:1042-62.
- Cameron, J.E. (2004). A three factor model of social identity. *Self and Identity* 3:239-62.
- Farrington, D.P. (1986). Age and crime. *Crime and Justice*, 7, 189-250.
- Giordano, P.C., Cernkovich, S.A. & Rudolph, J.L. (2002). Gender, crime, and desistance: Toward a theory of cognitive transformation. *American Journal of Sociology*, 107, 990-1064.
- Glueck, S. & Glueck, E. (1940). *Juvenile delinquents grown up*. New York: Commonwealth Fund.
- Hogg, M.A. (2006). Social identity theory. In *Contemporary Social Psychological Theories*, ed. Burke, P.J. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Kawakami, K., Phills, C.E., Greenwald, A.G., Simard, D., Pontiero, J., Brnjas, A., Khan, B., Mills, J., & Dovidio, J.F. (2012). In perfect harmony: Synchronizing the self to activated social categories. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 102:562-75.
- Laub, J. H., & Sampson, R. J. (2001). Understanding desistance from crime, Tonry, M. (ed.), *Crime and justice: A review of research* (Vol. 28, pp. 1-69). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Laub, J. H., & Sampson, R. J. (2003). *Shared beginning, divergent lives: Delinquent boys to age 70*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Little, M. (1990). *Young Men in Prison: The Criminal Identity Explored Through the Rules of Behaviour*.

Hants, UK: Dartmouth Publishing Co.

- Maruna, S. (2004). Desistance from crime and explanatory style. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 20(2), 184-200.
- Maruna, S. (2001). *Making good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Maruna, S., LeBel, T., Mitchel, N. & Naples, M. (2004). Pygmalion in the reintegration process: Desistance from crime through the looking glass. *Psychology, Crime and Law*, 10(3), 271-281.
- Moffitt, T.E. (1993). Adolescent-limited and life-course-persistent antisocial behavior: A developmental taxonomy. *Psychological Review*, 100, 674-701.
- Mulvey, E.P, Steinberg, L, Fagan, J, Cauffman, E, Piquero, A.R., Chassin, L., Knight, G.P., Brame, R. Shubert, C.A., Heckler, T, & Losoya, S.H. (2004). Theory and research on desistance from antisocial behavior among serious adolescent offenders. *Youth Violence*.
- Paternoster, R. & Bushway, S. (2009). Desistance and the 'feared self': Toward an identity theory of criminal desistance. *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 99:1103-56.
- Sampson, R.J. & Laub, J.H. (1993). *Crime in the making: Pathways and turning points through life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Shover, N. (1996). *Great Pretenders: Pursuits and Careers of Persistent Thieves*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Sommers, I, Baskin, D. R., & Fagan, J. (2004). Getting out of the life: Crime desistance by female street offenders, in Pogrebin, M. (ed.), *About criminals: A view of the offender's world* (pp. 322-332). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. *Reprint of Sommers, I., Baskin, D. R., & Fagan, J. (1994). Getting out of the life: Crime desistance by female street offenders. Deviant Behavior, 15, 125-149.*
- Stryker, S. & Serpe, R.T. (1994). Identity salience and psychological centrality: Equivalent, overlapping, or complementary concepts? *Social Psychological Quarterly* 57:16-35.
- Tajfel, H. & Turner, J.C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, eds. Worchel, S. & Austin, W.G. Chicago: Nelson.
- Tittle, C.R. (1988). Two empirical regularities (maybe) in search of an explanation: Commentary on the age/crime debate. *Criminology* 26:75-85.
- Veysey, B.M., Grasmere, J., & Andersen, R. (2010). Supporting peer recovery in rural New England: The RECOVER Project, Franklin County, MA. *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly*, 28(3), 306-25.
- Veysey, B.M., Heckman, J., Mazelis, R., Markoff, L. & Russell, L. (2006). *It's my time to live: Journeys to healing and recovery*. Washington, DC: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, US Department of Health and Human Services.
- Webster, C., MacDonald, R., & Simpson, M. (2006). Predicting criminality? Risk factors, neighbourhood influence and desistance. *Youth Justice*, 6, 7-22.