

Book Reviews

The Dynamics of Desistance: Charting Pathways through Change*

Deirdre Healy

Cullompton, UK: Willan Publishing, 2010

ISBN: 978-1-84392-783-9, 240 pages, hardback, £40.00

Deirdre Healy's excellent book (part of the International Series on Desistance and Rehabilitation, edited by Stephen Farrall of Sheffield University) ends with a quote that may be key to appreciating its core. A participant in the study at the centre of the book, identified only as 'KV28', urges offenders who aspire to become fellow desisters to:

Stop using [drugs, presumably], be open-minded, look for a bit of inner strength or inner wisdom coz everybody has it. Just find a few good friends, decent people that can actually help you and cling onto them. That's what I done. I asked myself, 'What do I fuckin' want?' Even though it's going to be hard but you only feel that if you have fear – 'I can't do that.' Put your mind down to it, nothing's impossible.

Who could disagree with this sound exhortation? Its value is more than a 'common sense' lesson from someone who has walked the talk. It points up some of the issues and research enquiries of central importance in the desistance research literature: do offenders stop offending because of their own inner strengths and changes in their cognitive processes and worldview (*human capital*), or because of external factors and supports

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(*social capital*), or for some other reason? And to what extent can and should professional interventions, such as Probation supervision, influence such change for the better? This book unpicks and unlocks many of the complexities of this discussion, without purporting to set out simplistic 'answers'. In fact it is scholarly, well researched and well written throughout, and maintains a good balance between academic rigour and practicality.

The book does all this from an Irish perspective, using Irish research (which is integrated very well with the relevant international literature), and adds significantly to the relatively small but growing body of criminological research on this island. Healy makes a valuable contribution to the debate on the workings of the so-called 'black box' of desistance – why and how people change – and on the effectiveness of Probation supervision and related interventions in helping with offender rehabilitation and the journey towards establishing long-term desistance. On the age-old 'care versus control' debate, Healy argues (p. 184) that 'genuine change is more powerful than enforced compliance, although it may follow from it.' At the same time, the study points to the potential value of the Probation Officer–probationer professional relationship and highlights core Probation practices in encouraging desistance.

Change, on the path to desistance, is illustrated as a spiral rather than a linear or even a circular process. It is a 'zigzag process ... characterised by tenuous motivation, instability and uncertainty' (p. 175). It will be no great surprise to Probation Officers and others that the study (p. 177) found that, 'in general, desisters had higher levels of self-efficacy, better coping skills and better developed support mechanisms.' There are lessons for Probation organisations and practice throughout the study. Healy's research found that 'the vast majority of participants did not regard professional agencies as potential sources of support' (p. 123). She does, however, acknowledge that 'probation may act as a "hook" for change which, if deemed meaningful and accessible by the probationer, can engender desistance' (p. 147).

While positing that Probation practice in Ireland 'has some key elements that constitute the desistance paradigm ... explicitly operating within the social work framework' (p. 127), Healy also suggests that 'practitioners may feel uncomfortable with desistance research because of its focus on the processes of self-change, which, on the surface, appears to conflict with the goal of rehabilitation which is to encourage desistance through formal interventions' (p. 126). Towards the end of the

book, one of the participants in the Dublin probation study is quoted as referring to Probation as ‘a nosy kind of job’ (p. 143). This reviewer, as a Probation practitioner, would not have any difficulty with that epithet.

In situations where ‘social context provides a framework for action, individual choices and capacities, otherwise known as agency, then come into play’ (p. 170). In this matrix of conditions and factors, Probation can be what Healy refers to as the ‘hook for change’, working to motivate offenders and mediating the ‘tipping points’ in the trauma of court appearance or time in custody while harnessing the human and social resources available to support positive change. Such tipping points are described as ‘significant life events [that] constitute opportunities for change’ (p.186) in the chaos of individual lives. These events can serve to disrupt the linear pattern of offending and often lead to ‘massive’ or ‘landslide’ shifts in behaviour and lifestyle, where ‘changes tend to be abrupt rather than gradual’ (pp. 76–77). And in this context, it is absolutely right that individual offenders and their families and wider social supports should constitute the most significant parts of achieving and maintaining positive life gains. It is likely that the individual and their social network may also already have laid the groundwork for change, ahead of the trigger that eventually catapults or nudges them into the change spiral. The specific value of Probation work is in being the focused, energetic and professional catalyst for positive change in the time available while the offender is under supervision.

Healy’s book presents a very good summary of the desistance field of study and is particularly strong in linking desistance research with wider practice implications. It is a significant and welcome new resource for academics, students and practitioners in the Probation and wider criminological and criminal justice fields.

How Offenders Transform Their Lives***Edited by Bonita M. Veysey, Johanna Christian and Damian J. Martinez**

Cullompton, UK: Willan Publishing, 2009

ISBN: 978-1-84392-508-8, 225 pages, paperback, £25.99

Contributors to this book include Johanna Christian, M. Kay Harris, Bryn Herrschaft, Emma Hughes, Russ Immarigeon, Suzanne Kurth, Thomas P. LeBel, Damian J. Martinez, Shadd Maruna, Nick Mitchell, Merry Morash, Michelle Naples, Barbara Owen, Lois Presser, Heather Tubman-Carbone and Bonita M. Veysey. The focus is on individual identity transformation of formerly incarcerated persons and its role in the promotion of desistance from offending. A range of qualitative studies are presented throughout the volume which examine samples of prisoners and/or former prisoners in the USA and the UK. Some of the analyses consider subjects such as race, gender, age and socio-economic status. Importantly, this volume draws attention to the experiences and perspectives of the men and women who are currently or have formerly been incarcerated.

The concept of identity formation and transformation is explained and defined in the opening chapter by the editors. Current knowledge and practice in this field is highlighted along with a critique of modern criminal justice, correctional and rehabilitative practices. Relevant research is used to set the scene in understanding the oft-neglected importance of individual identity and self-concept in transformative processes. A useful overview of subsequent chapters is also provided.

In the second chapter, Christian, Veysey, Herrschaft and Tubman-Carbone provide an account of their use of qualitative methods to explore change experiences for people with stigmatized experiences. Their research, drawn from a sample of individuals participating in rehabilitation programmes in the USA, examined formerly incarcerated individuals' personal narratives for change. Results and themes are explained clearly and supported with relevant tables. The results suggest that the transformation process is highly individualised in terms of definition and markers of success.

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In the third chapter, drawing data from a small sample of an ex-prisoner reintegration programme in New York State, Maruna, LeBel, Naples and Mitchell explore how identity transformation can occur in practice. The researchers offer an insight into how individuals both moderated and affirmed identities in response to interaction within the therapeutic relationship.

Following on from the theme of social interaction in the change process, the fourth chapter by Martinez explores how identity transformation is both mediated and sustained by social support. A small group of former prisoners from an adult prison transition centre in the USA and their key family members were included in the study. A qualitative exploration of their transition from prison to community was performed. The findings highlight two mechanisms in negotiating identity change. Firstly, a positive potential for family support in the transformative process was found. Secondly, the role of perceived self-efficacy within these relationships was found to promote self-perceived identity change.

The fifth chapter follows a similar approach. Using insights gained from the observation of one former prisoner interacting with a small group of university students in the USA, Presser and Kurth argue that identity transformation is shaped by social interaction. Although focusing on the experience of one individual, this study provides a descriptive insight into how the participant negotiated and renegotiated personal identity in response to interaction with the group.

In the sixth chapter Hughes considers the role of prisoner education and the development of identities through the mechanism of distance learning within a British prison. Significantly, she teases out the students' own narratives around identity and change. The participants promoted the transformative potential of education in developing identities that did not revolve around being a 'prisoner'. Also highlighted were the challenges and changing implications of transforming identities within the prison setting.

Similarly to themes in earlier chapters, a symbolic interaction viewpoint is taken by Owen in the seventh chapter. She offers a well-presented and detailed observational study on women prisoners participating in a prison drug treatment programme in the USA. The findings promote the view that the self is created, maintained and changed through looking at and listening to the experience of others. Of particular interest in this study was the conflict between the competing

ethos of the therapeutic setting and that of the prison subculture. Importantly, the chapter points to the role of agencies in providing support post-prison and of assisting female prisoners to develop social capital.

Morash explores the complex needs and transformative processes of women released from prison and under parole/probation supervision in the USA in the eighth chapter. Descriptive analyses of styles of supervision highlight the impact of structure and quality of supervision on outcomes in self-change and desistance over a one-year period. Specifically, the role of personal agency in defining, promoting and/or resisting change is considered. The author compares gender-responsive and gender-neutral practices and suggests that gender-responsive programming may have better outcomes in terms of meeting individual needs and promoting desistance.

In the ninth chapter Harris presents a detailed investigation of a transformative model of identity change designed, developed and facilitated by a group of incarcerated men in the USA. The chapter explores peer intervention as a mechanism for encouraging positive change within those who are or have been involved in street crime. Mainly descriptive in nature, the chapter explains the key underpinning and practical elements of the model as well as the experiences of a sample of those who have participated in it. Notably this exploration highlights the value of peer-led intervention in encouraging positive personal and social changes.

The penultimate chapter builds on the theme of social action. LeBel explores a formerly incarcerated person's use of advocacy and activism in overcoming negative identities associated with criminal activity. With support from relevant literature the author regards advocacy and activism as proactive coping strategies in developing identity change. Given the detailed presentation of methodology and results, this chapter may be of particular value and more easily accessible to readers with an academic and/or research orientation.

In the final chapter Immarigeon draws together the themes of the preceding chapters and suggests implications for future criminal justice policy. The difficulties inherent in influencing policy decisions are discussed. Helpfully, the author proposes that the next step would be to expand research to help to inform future policy-makers about what can be done to develop programming within prisons and community-based settings. Building on the entries in this volume and supported by extant

research, he puts forward a strong argument for the role of families and communities in promoting and supporting positive identity change.

In summary, through careful consideration of qualitative research this volume highlights a range of mechanisms by which individual change can be encouraged and supported within a criminal justice context. Although largely based on research from the USA, important insights and themes are presented that would be relevant to modern correctional and criminal justice practices in a variety of countries.

The use of short-term small-scale qualitative research precludes the generalisation of the findings in the studies. Pertinent gaps in research are highlighted and suggestions are given for ways to fill them. Perhaps most significantly, however, this book provides direct insights into the perspectives of individuals engaging in transformative processes.

Overall the book is well organised and each chapter flows convincingly from the previous. The introductory and concluding chapters are particularly useful in orienting the reader and contextualising the content. This book will be of interest to students, researchers and teachers as well as practitioners in the social sciences, especially in criminal justice and social work/welfare. It will be relevant to providers in the community and voluntary sectors working in partnership with social work and criminal justice agencies.

Youth Justice Handbook: Theory, Policy and Practice*
Edited by Wayne Taylor, Rod Earle and Richard Hester

Cullompton, UK: Willan Publishing, 2009

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In 2010, the debate over how society treats its delinquent children has raged more than ever. A febrile media terrifies the public with images of hoody-clad bogey-kids who have eschewed apple-scrumping for stabbing and binge-drinking. Recent allegations about Jon Venables, whose trial for the murder of Jamie Bulger in 1993 was a watershed for modern Youth Justice policy, have reignited the discussion.

Hoping to bring a measured perspective into the fray, the *Youth Justice Handbook* presents itself as ‘a friendly companion with which to consider some ... of the most pressing issues for practitioners in Youth Justice today’. Emanating from a 2007 forum where the key question was, ‘What knowledge and skills do you need to practise effectively as a professional within the youth system?’, this handbook is a distillation of the latest thinking on how to empower practitioners.

The handbook is divided into five sections, subdivided into brief chapters written by a variety of senior academics. Section 1 deals with the context of childhood and youth, beginning with an exploration of the link between crime and inequality. Joe Yates’s illuminating chapter on the history of society’s attitudes to youth and crime suggests that our self-appointed moral guardians have always bewailed the loss of an imaginary golden age where wayward children could be kept in line with a clip on the ear from the local bobby. Grover’s argument that ‘the Criminal Justice agencies basically manage poor people’ is given added weight in the light of recent events in Parliament, and reflects a truth that says more about the priorities and targets of these agencies than the morality or inherent criminality of the disadvantaged. Digging deeper into the causes of youth poverty and crime reveals a depressingly familiar line-up of suspects – fractured families, disrupted education, unemployment and substance misuse. Yates concludes that New Labour failed to bridge inequality and that poverty remains ‘the single most pernicious influence’ that is harming our young people today.

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Section 2 discusses research into effective practice. Goldson's chapter offers five evidence-based principles that he believes should lead to 'youth justice with integrity, namely – addressing poverty and inequality, universality, diversion, deinstitutionalization and depoliticization'. These guidelines reflect sound, concrete policies, but policies that can only truly be applied by a government that turns away from the reactionary rhetoric of a vengeful media. Elsewhere, Case bemoans the marginalization of young people's voices, stating that risk assessment tools are biased towards statistics, ignoring vast tracts of qualitative information that capture the realities of youth experience. Case's recommendation that risk assessment be refocused to include professional judgement in order to promote young people's welfare is a sensible one, and chimes with 'third-generation' risk assessments currently used by Probation areas.

Section 3 examines the political realities of the youth justice system. In her chapter on parenting orders, Holt observes that an emphasis on parenting skills misses an opportunity for these sessions to address the problems of social and economic disadvantage. She shows us a glimpse of the often-neglected experience of parents while on these orders, recording their feelings of injustice, humiliation and anger. While there were some positive experiences, the overall picture seemed to show that the orders created little change in children's ongoing behaviour.

Helen Mahaffey's brief history of restorative justice will be a worthwhile read for practitioners in Northern Ireland. Its origins in New Zealand and Australia, the 'Wagga' model's emphasis on awareness of harm caused and the need to meet responsibility, and Braithwaite's theory of shame as a social control provided this reviewer with a useful primer on restorative justice. Research into outcomes seems generally positive, although Mahaffey notes that the wide variety of restorative justice methods – some related only loosely by the name 'restorative' – means that practitioners should be aware of which type they choose.

Desistance theories aim to explain the decline of criminal activity with age, and these loom large in Section 4, on reflective practice. Similarly to positive psychology's interest in healthy functioning, studies into desistance ask what it is that makes many twenty-somethings grow out of youthful delinquency, and how we can use such information for the benefit of persistent offenders. Family, friends, and employment are some of the protective factors involved. Hine advises practitioners 'to listen to what young people have to say, look for the strengths and build

on them'. This in turn can help both practitioner and client work on a realistic strategy that builds on pro-social relationships and pastimes.

Taylor's chapter on reflective practice is required reading for any conscientious practitioner who wants to apply the highest levels of rigour to their work. With Thompson's mantra of 'reading, questioning, watching, feeling, talking and ... thinking', he reminds us of the need to evaluate critically the methods we use when working with young people.

Section 5, on 'Widening Contexts', takes a step back from the preceding arguments to look at the guiding principles in both global and national legal authorities' responses to youth criminality. Readers of this journal will be interested in Kelvin Doherty's concluding chapter on restorative justice (RJ) in Northern Ireland. Criticised initially for their close links to paramilitary organisations, both fledgling RJ schemes in the North have now been accredited by the government, and Doherty cites some positive research that gives evidence of their success in reducing reoffending.

This handbook is a valuable introduction to the complexities of Youth Justice. Practitioners who read it will enhance their knowledge on the theories of why young people choose to break the law and why they choose to stop breaking the law. They will sharpen their critical faculties and be given food for thought when pondering potential interventions.

One significant omission is the dearth of information on offending behaviour programmes, particularly those that use cognitive-behavioural therapy.

Setting this major caveat aside, the *Youth Justice Handbook* is an accessible, wide-ranging and elegantly written text, highly recommended for anyone working with young people in the Criminal Justice System.