# An Exploration of the Relationship Between Probation Supervision and Desistance: A Systematic Narrative Review

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**Summary:** Desistance theory is premised on the concept that 'people can change' (Maruna, 2017, p. 6). Current desistance discourses evidence a shift in emphasis from the individual narrative to a refocusing that includes the social and structural determinants of the lived experience (Barr and Montgomery, 2016), arguably allowing a more meaningful understanding of personal agency in context. Whilst desistance research explores a range of diverse factors, including Probation Officers' and individuals' perspectives on its impact in achieving better outcomes, desistance as a theoretical approach is contested. Critics argue that a lack of consensus in its conceptualisation and operationalising in practice, along with an over-individualistic focus and broad appropriation across disparate contexts and environments, potentially diminishes its appeal in managerialist contexts (Weaver, 2019).

This paper presents findings from a systematic narrative review of the literature regarding probation supervision and desistance. A thematic analysis and narrative synthesis identified four key themes. Firstly, probation supervision offers an opportunity to create a new identity, distanced from an offending past, but this is a complex process that first emerges from an individual's belief in their redeemability. Secondly, supportive relationships are more conducive to fostering desistance than authoritative, surveillance-based approaches; however, some studies identified that when managing risk, aspects of an authoritative approach are necessary. Thirdly, probation services' response to risk influences perspectives of desistance amongst supervisees, with several studies acknowledging the deleterious impacts and associated stigma of criminal justice system involvement. Finally, although included studies appear to indicate the effectiveness of supervision in reducing offending, evidence on what approaches work best, or factors contributing to the quality of experience, is limited. The probation practitioner's approach to the supervisory relationship may play a pivotal role in the desistance narratives of those involved in the criminal justice system.

**Keywords:** Supervision, desistance, probation, rehabilitation, sentences, risk management, protect, crime.

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## Introduction

Contemporary probation services have three fundamental responsibilities: supporting successful integration – *rehabilitation*; supervising court sentences – *supervision*; and protecting the public from harm – *risk management* (Mair, 2016; PBNI, 2020). Raynor and Vanstone (2015) suggest that Probation Officers with a high level of individual skill and a commitment to practice that is evidence-based, are more likely to have a positive impact on an individual's motivation to change. If a key objective of probation supervision is to reduce offending, then knowing how desistance happens in practice may be an essential understanding for probation services.

Desistance from crime (cessation of offending) is a priority for criminal justice policy, practice, and research (McNeill *et al.*, 2012). The development of life-course criminology prompted investigation of the range of factors or variables over the lifespan that support desistance from reoffending (Laub and Sampson, 2001). Later developments factored in the critical role of relationships (social bonds) and personal journeys (McNeill, 2016). Contemporary understandings of desistance evidence a refocusing from its representation as mostly a personal journey, to acknowledge that desistance is a social movement (Barr and Montgomery, 2016; Maruna, 2017). Such thinking identifies inherent social and structural barriers for individuals in desisting and the challenges in realising personal agency, for example the impact of multiple exclusions (McNeill *et al.*, 2012). Regardless of variance in perspective, theorists agree that desistance is an important change process that should be supported. A critical factor of its appeal is the holistic focus on the 'person in environment', contrasting the narrow lens of the risk paradigm, often critiqued as potentially reductive and further pathologising (Wigzell, 2021).

Some recent literature proposes a more integrative understanding and application of the combined merits of both desistance and the risk paradigm in reducing offending and protecting the public (Maruna and Mann, 2019). Such revisioning may be seen as reflected in departmental strategic shifts that aim to marry *desistance as process*, whilst maintaining the emphasis on managing risk in practice. Outcomes of a recent Department of Justice and Equality (2020) evidence review of policy responses to recidivism identified desistance as critical to understanding relapse in criminal behaviour. In England and Wales, Kemshall (2021) has recently proposed a blended approach which may be taken as further evidence of a coalescing of best

evidence from dominant perspectives informing practice. Kemshall (2021) refers to 'protective integration' where 'strategies seek a balanced approach to risk management focusing on desistance and rehabilitation; changing risky behaviours and meeting legitimate needs; reducing risks and reducing reoffending behaviours; and avoiding over-intrusion on those whose risk does not justify it' (Kemshall 2021, p. 4). Such an envisioning may appear some distance from Maruna's (2017) imagining of desistance as an emancipatory social movement, involving organised user co-produced and led services that function at every level of the system, similar to the recovery model in mental health. Theoretical perspectives seem to diverge in how desistance is conceptualised, possibly reflecting a wider issue with how practitioners conceive desistance and how it may be realised in the field.

As of March 2021, PBNI was responsible for supervising 3,507 people (PBNI, 2021), a statistic that arguably provides a rationale for exploring the practice of probation supervision, and the meaning of desistance within this. Furthermore, of the 20,856 individuals who received a non-custodial court disposal in the year 2018/19, 3,860 (18.5 per cent) reoffended during the first year, with 63.8 per cent having committed previous offending (Department of Justice, 2021). With such prevalence, appreciating what aspects of the supervisory process support desistance seems critical for practitioners. The process of probation supervision is identified as all processes commonplace within the monitoring of community-based impositions (Durnescu, 2016). Despite the expanse of this role, Durnescu (2016) highlights the limits of existing research into the supervision process, acknowledging challenges in making sense of the complexity of factors, from practitioner characteristics to the unique legal parameters within which practitioners operate – notwithstanding cultural and jurisdictional differences.

Research into probation supervision often involves qualitative longitudinal studies premised upon self-narratives (Leibrich, 1993; Raynor *et al.*, 2014). Anderson (2016, p. 408) maintains the value of 'bearing witness to desistance' in practice, and professional supervision in probation practice is recognised as integral to promoting good outcomes in supporting individuals to desist from offending (Forbes, 2010; Salyers *et al.*, 2015; Raynor, 2019). Yet understanding what factors, or range of factors, are implicated in achieving this, and how 'bearing witness' happens, is limited. Moreover, less is understood about practitioners' perspectives on desistance as a holistic empowerment approach in criminal justice.

## Method

This review aimed to explore the available empirical evidence on the relationship between desistance and probation supervision, to understand whether desistance featured within supervision and how this manifests for those involved. Retrieved literature was systematically appraised in ascertaining its relevance to the project aims. A process of narrative synthesis then extracted key themes from selected studies, with a view to identifying whether these findings may provide insight and potentially have application for practitioners engaged in supervision in criminal justice settings. A systematic narrative review provides a robust methodical approach to the appraisal and synthesis of empirical research evidence (Popay *et al.*, 2006). Extrapolating and analysing key overarching themes from the synthesis should be a key outcome of a quality review (Siddaway *et al.*, 2019).

## Search strategy

In February 2021, three databases were searched (Criminal Justice Database, PsycINFO and Social Care Online) using three concept groups: 'Probation OR parole', 'Supervision OR management of offenders' and 'Desistance OR reoffend OR recidivism'. Retrieved articles were scrutinised against defined inclusion and exclusion criteria (*n=314*). Inclusion criteria included empirical primary research, peer reviewed in reputable relevant journals to ensure quality and validity. In ensuring relevance to the review aim and objectives, the research design of selected studies needed to include participants, or a sample demographic directly involved with probation services, either as a practitioner or serving a sentence. No exclusion was imposed on date to avoid limitations on yielding as extensive a return as possible. Grey material, non-English language, and non-peer-reviewed publications were excluded. Quality Appraisal Tools (QATs) were used in evaluating each study (Taylor *et al.*, 2015). Twenty studies were selected, with 18 eventually being included. The review maintains the original study descriptors applied to included participants, for example, *probationer, offender, offender manager.*

## Limitations

This review was limited to three databases including only peer-reviewed articles, with specific search terms applied. Whilst systematic, this approach may have excluded some relevant studies. Significant divergence exists in international criminal justice systems and probation services' aims,

administration and operational practices. Implications for this review mean that comparisons across these systems, with regard to how desistance is implemented, are tentative. Whilst a diverse range of studies is included, many are small in scale which limits their generalisability.

## Findings

### *Me, myself, and ... my criminal record? (Identity)*

Establishing a non-offending identity is understood as a complex, dynamic and recursive process, and emerges as a dominant theme throughout desistance literature. King's (2013a) UK study of probationers (*n*=20) analysed transitions towards desistance, proposing that a non-offending identity commences in the early phases of desistance as individuals endeavour to distance themselves from their past offences. Analysis of semi-structured interviews saw three key themes emerge. Firstly, the desistance process entails a coming to terms with the harm caused to victims. Taking responsibility allows clarity and enables probationers to construct narratives of their future selves in a prosocial manner (exhibiting behaviours intended to benefit others), in contrast to their offending past. Second, and relatedly, past actions can be located in a loss of control due to external factors such as addictions, with probationers almost reflecting a sense of inevitability regarding their offending, their actions being a direct consequence of drug and/or alcohol addiction (or other external factors deemed beyond their control). Ultimately, in gaining clarity over past actions and recognising how diminished personal autonomy featured in offending, individuals are able to create distance between their past and future identities. King's (2013a) research found that this personal redefining is reinforced with a new-found sense of moral agency, with the individual acquiring a moral capital and able to discern right from wrong. In acknowledging certain inevitability about their past offending, desistance requires an individual to accept responsibility for any necessary changes of personal and social context.

Järveläinen and Rantanen's (2019) Finnish study with offender managers (*n*=11) explores social interactions between supervisors and offenders, to elicit the essential factors of this relationship that promote the prevention of recidivism. Findings indicated that the supervision process is largely premised on social interaction, with interviewees identifying the desirable supervisory concepts of 'prisoner knowledge', 'situational awareness', and 'reading the situation'. Moreover, findings showed that the offender managers were

aware of inherent tensions existing between the language of support and control. The supervisors evidenced that they supported the concept of an equitable relationship through clearly defining and rebuilding identities as part of an interactional process. The study concludes that supervision premised on social interaction can support an individual to desist from offending through recognition of changes to social identity.

Similarly, Kay's (2016) earlier study also examined how assessment and categorisation of the individual's 'risk' impacts on their identity and the supervisory process. Probationers ($n$=20) and their supervisors ($n$=10) identified the process of labelling and being labelled 'high risk' as detrimental to their relationship and something that altered perceptions of the probationer's sense of self. Kay (2016) contended that the process by which probation services assess and categorise risks which determine interventions can negatively impact on the probationer's identity, becoming even further stigmatising. Indeed, King's earlier (2013a) study appeared to evidence that, to desist, individuals needed to acquire positive testimony, one at odds with their label of 'high risk'. Acknowledging the individual's actions and efforts in constructing a new identity seems critical to their desistance narrative in demonstrating that a positive change of behaviour has occurred. The findings suggest that individuals in the early stages of desistance construct new narratives, which enable them to sustain their non-offending behaviour. Crucially, these early narratives aid the formation of a future identity, allowing them to create distance from their past offending. Notably, as Järveläinen and Rantanen's (2019) research evidenced, this process of creating an identity opposed to offending may promote desistance, and the supervisory relationship seems critical in supporting this.

In an Australian study, O'Sullivan *et al.* (2016) sought to measure offenders' ($n$=51) belief in the possibility of desistance. Results identified three intrinsic factors impacting on an offender's belief in their redeemability. First, a sense of belonging emerged as critical: seeking and being positively accepted by significant others. Secondly, the concept of agency was important, wherein the offender believes that they can influence and have control of their desistance. Lastly, optimism emerges as a key factor in determining if change is achievable, cited as a sense of personal belief in the capacity to achieve positive outcomes. Quinn and Cooke's (2019) later study involving probationers ($n$=20) attempted to further understand factors facilitating desistance, by exploring retrospective accounts of acquisitive offenders. They identify age, and the process of distancing themselves from

their former offending identity, as the prevailing factor in desisting from further acquisitive offences. Findings showed that 'growing up' coincided with 'growing out of it', suggesting that age alters an individual's perspective towards offending. The findings suggest that recognising the extent to which victims were adversely impacted by their actions (including recognising harm caused) plays a role in the formation of a new identity. Indeed, increased empathy towards victims of any further offending proved more conducive to desisting from further offending than any physical deterrent or crime-prevention measures imposed by probation services. The authors concluded that consideration of the impact of their behaviours on others mitigated against self-interest.

Stone *et al's*. (2018) study on American female offenders (*n*=93) explored identity processes specific to females and their role in promoting desistance. Results indicate that women who provided consistent accounts of personal agency, redemption, and prosocial narratives (behaviours akin to supporting others) were less likely to reoffend. Females who narrated accounts of spoiled identities (narratives accounting for prevailing trauma and unmet needs) expressed low personal agency, portraying themselves as permanently damaged by their prior offending. However, findings concluded that under parole supervision, identity change is achievable when supervisors both recognise and promote such change. This limited study appears to support the evidence from the male-only studies, proposing that identity verification and positive identity testimony may counteract some of the negative stigma associated with being on parole. Taken cumulatively, the studies appear to suggest that through fostering and encouraging identity reconstruction, self-esteem and motivation, practitioners may overcome some critical barriers to achieving desistance.

### *Good cop, bad cop (Relationships)*

How practitioners and probationers develop and maintain relationships, and the extent to which these are significant or otherwise is a prevailing theme across desistance literature. Doekhie *et al*. (2018) conducted a mixed-method longitudinal study of male probationers (*n*=23) in the Netherlands to understand whether assessing risk or supporting desistance was the dominant focus of parole supervision. Case files were analysed for recidivism rates, whilst probationer interviews explored perspectives of desistance. Findings demonstrated that probationers with a non-supportive Probation Officer maintained a negative perception of supervision, which adversely impacted

upon their belief in achieving desistance. Supportive relationships focus on meeting assessed needs and efforts to achieve goals, whereas surveillance approaches concentrate on crime-control and monitoring (Ditton and Ford, 1994). Whilst case-file analysis found frequent application of both approaches, the supportive approach (focusing on problem-solving and achieving attainable goals) was most evidenced; however, probationers' perspectives overwhelmingly reported a non-supportive approach. Doekhie *et al.* (2018) understood this discrepancy as indicative of the nature of the offences committed and consequent intensity of mandated supervision. Probationers citing a positive experience favoured a supportive 'trial and error' approach to supervision, combining a recognition of system controls (surveillance) co-existing with the more human element of supervision (support). Practitioners adopting this approach were viewed as less of an organisational 'pawn' and perceived to be more willing to promote desistance. In a separate study by King (2013b), semi-structured interviews with individuals under probation supervion (*n*=20) explored the impact of probation on early transitions towards desistance. The majority (95 per cent) of the participants identified their Probation Officers as supportive and contributing to their desistance. Two participants detailed a punitive experience of supervision, citing the presence of the controlling surveillance approach, which they believed undermined the quality of the supervisory relationship. Both studies appear to support the role of relationships in supporting desistance.

In a large-scale American study, Chamberlain *et al.* (2017) interviewed parolees (*n*=1697) at three, six and fifteen months post-release, to explore whether the quality of the supervisory relationship influenced outcomes such as recidivism. Their findings seem to support other studies with parolees who experienced supportive relationships returning a 34 per cent decrease in reoffending. Conversely, those experiencing a non-supportive relationship were more likely to reoffend. Authors highlighted the importance of establishing a high-quality and supportive relationship as factors beneficial in significantly improving the outcomes of supervision and supporting desistance.

In an earlier mixed-method American study, Bonta *et al.* (2008) analysed case files and interviews with parolees (*n*=154) and parole officers (*n*=62), to explore whether individuals benefitted from community supervision over incarceration. Evidencing empathy, warmth and firmness emerged as essential supportive prerequisites to forming tangible relationships. Parolees clearly favoured respectful relationships to create an environment conducive

to addressing criminogenic needs. Perhaps surprisingly, firmness scored high amongst positive indicators, suggesting that boundaries and accountability were acknowledged as essential components of a supportive relationship. Whilst practice differs internationally and over time, Rex's (1999) UK research with a much smaller sample (Probation Officers [*n*=21] and probationers [*n*=60]) also found that probationers felt engaged in supervision once a supportive relationship was established. This need to feel engaged was cited as an essential proponent to the working relationship if the Probation Officers were to influence a change in behaviour (promote desistance). Empathy placed top of the list of positive qualities cited by 87 per cent of participants, with listening skills second at 65 per cent. As in Bonta *et al.'s* (2008) study, control/firmness emerged again as positive indicators of a supportive relationship, with 65 per cent of probationers favouring the formal requirements of the supervisory process and clearly identified boundaries. Research cited in this section would seem to indicate that if desistance is to be cultivated and maintained, individuals need to feel engaged in the supervisory process. Furthermore, supportive relationships need practitioners to display certain qualities and skills if the individual is to feel engaged in the supervision process.

Irwin-Rogers' (2017) study with probationers (*n*=21) and their managers (*n*=10) in England and Wales explores the theme of power in the professional relationship, specifically the extent to which such power is perceived to be legitimate. Findings indicated that probationers' perceptions of the legitimacy of power exercised was contingent upon two factors: the procedures supervisors adopted, and the outcomes they achieved. Consistent with the aforementioned studies, a professional relationship based on empathy, dignified treatment, and provision of accurate/timely information was important to perceived legitimacy. A UK study by Rowe *et al.* (2018) adds weight to the notion of legitimacy and how it factors in promoting desistance. They found that where Probation Officers demonstrated authoritative characteristics as opposed to authoritarian ones, probationers (*n*=64) were more likely to achieve positive outcomes through developing a working relationship. The probationers cited similar values, such as authenticity and credibility, as critical factors for their supervisors to display in demonstrating their commitment to promoting desistance in those they supervise. Indeed, as Irwin-Rogers' (2017) study attests, legitimacy is established from the justifiability of practitioner actions, an acknowledgement that authority is earned through a commitment to promoting desistance.

## Risky business

The management of, and response to risk by probation services is a consistent focus across desistance studies. Lussier and Gress's (2014) research with Canadian sex offenders (*n*=69), explored differing types of supervision – for instance, in terms of regularity and intensity, assessing how such factors impacted on the responsivity of those under supervision. Those managed under specialised supervision regimes (for example, teams supervising sexual offending) evidenced higher levels of assessed dynamic-risk factors – those factors likely to change through the life course, such as employment, peer group (44.7 per cent) – than in the case of other supervisees (24.6 per cent). Low-risk offenders went on average 314.2 days without violations, whereas assessed high-risk offenders went 267.6 days. Whilst this was a relatively small qualitative study with a particular offending population, findings evidence that dynamic-risk factors are predictive of a breach of supervisory requirements as well as general recidivism, irrespective of the type of community supervision to which people are subject. Age, negative social influences and limited self-regulation were cited as the predominant dynamic-risk factors impacting upon desistance.

Bonta *et al.'s* (2008) research illustrated how the frequency of probation supervision is often determined by an assessment of risk. Results further indicated that where risk is assessed by prioritising criminogenic needs (changeable factors associated with criminal activity such as antisocial behaviour), some needs go unmet. For example, where substance misuse was identified, 79.5 per cent of Probation Officers facilitated an intervention to address such needs, yet only 10 per cent of practitioners addressed unemployment as an assessed need. Notably, some assessed criminogenic needs were not discussed at all throughout supervision. The study provides a practitioner riposte identifying bureaucratic factors, case weighting, and time constraints as cause for some needs going unmet under supervision. Crucially, the study evidences that the amount of time delegated to addressing an assessed risk actively lowers recidivism rates.

Focusing on the concept of assessed risk, Kay's (2016) study in England and Wales explored desistance narratives amongst high-risk probationers assigned to the National Probation Services (NPS) and low-risk probationers assigned to the Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRC). The study focused on probationers' perceptions as they transitioned across agencies from the CRC to the NPS. Findings evidence a dissonance between how the

probation services were perceived, with the NPS viewed as punitive by virtue of its handling 'higher-risk' individuals and its increased levels of offence-focused work. Conversely, the CRC was viewed as more supportive to desistance and responsive to emerging needs, as opposed to the intense offence focus under NPS. The interviewed probationers demonstrated a lack of understanding about their transition to new supervision arrangements, and did not identify with or perceive themselves in terms of their assessed 'high risk'. The study evidences supervision's successful outcomes in light of the beneficial recidivism rates; however, the responsivity to risk invariably impacted upon the individual's experience of desistance.

## *Does supervision promote desistance? (Effectiveness)*

The terms 'desistance' and 'recidivism' may appear opposing in many respects, yet they are inextricably linked. Studies reviewed in this section focus on analysis of large data sets in examining whether a statistical relationship exists between supervision and desistance. Ostermann's (2013) US study reviewed data over a three-year post-release period (2005 to 2007 inclusive) on a large sample of parolees (*n*=29,299), to understand whether any correlation existed between probation supervision and recidivism rates. Results indicated that after six months, reoffending rates differed by 5 per cent between individuals under supervision, compared to their unsupervised counterparts, rising to 8 per cent at 36-months post release. The study concluded that supervision deters people from reoffending, but after the supervision period expires, it does not have long-lasting effects. In later research, Vito *et al.* (2015) conducted a large-scale study (*n*=1773) on the effectiveness of parole supervision. They too concluded that supervision acted as a deterrent to committing further offences, with factors implicated in a likely return to offending including prior drug and violent offences, and unemployment. Wan *et al.* (2015) conducted similar research in Australia on a post-custody sample (*n*=7,494) in 2009–10. Those supervised post release, reoffended at 22 per cent lower rates than unsupervised counterparts. Results evidenced a statistical relationship between recidivism and those released from custody under probation supervision, with those released under no formal supervision more likely to reoffend.

Frequency of supervision is explored by Chamberlain *et al.* (2017), with findings suggesting that probationers under supervision at least once a month were 47 per cent less likely to reoffend. Doekhie *et al's.* (2018) research appears to support these findings, with those under intensive supervision (a

frequency of once per week) 87 per cent less likely to reoffend. This resonates with Lussier and Gress's (2014) research identifying that this increase in frequency of supervision is more likely to lead to a breach of mandated requirements due to increased surveillance. The authors contended that community rehabilitation outcomes were significantly influenced by the presence of dynamic risk factors, and the initial stages under supervision were critical in terms of preventing breaches of supervision requirements. Adding to the effectiveness of supervision debate, Morash *et al.'s* (2016) qualitative study on female offenders (*n*=266) indicated that supervision intensity had no direct or indirect impact upon recidivism. The study sought to explore the actions of parole officers on women's recidivism in Michigan. Findings evidenced that parole supervision was ineffective in both combating criminogenic needs specifically related to women and in mitigating factors critical to women's recidivism, including poverty, housing, and criminal associates.

This section has identified key themes central to desistance, emerging from the available literature. Studies included provide some insights into the diverse, culturally specific and complex interplay of factors that merge in impacting on outcomes in desistance.

## Discussion

The reviewed studies provide some insights into how individuals under probation supervision and their supervisors conceptualise desistance over a number of key themes, yet research into probation supervision, as it relates to desistance, remains limited. HM Inspectorate of Probation (2021, p. 4) identified the lack of overall research conducted by probation services as 'disappointing'.

### Identity

Findings illustrate the complex and diverse perceptions that offenders and supervisors hold about identity through the process of desistance. Being on supervision can present opportunities for introspection, change and eschewing of the offender identity. This change process to a non-offending identity is reflected as complex, subjective, yet fundamental. Studies reviewed suggest that better understanding of critical processes in 'identity re-construction' might support Probation Officers in promoting desistance (King, 2013a; Järveläinen and Rantanen, 2019). Appreciating and fostering 'redeemability', where a sense of personal agency is developed to support

the belief that change is possible and achievable, seems central to this process (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2016; Quinn and Cooke, 2019). Nugent and Schinkel's (2016) work in underscoring the need for positive feedback from the 'meso'-level system in consolidating desistance at the micro level seems fundamental in recognising just how important opportunities for legitimacy and inclusion are in desistance. Added to this, being aware of the deleterious impact of stigma and labelling, and the extent to which practices might actually reinforce these (Kay, 2016), is critical. Studies appear to reflect the wider literature which situates identity as an interactional recursive process depending on complex factors in self and environment (Weaver, 2019).

## *Relationships*

Two dominant approaches to the supervisory relationship emerge: supportive (case worker) and non-supportive (surveillance). Overwhelmingly, the review found supportive relationships more conducive to promoting desistance, and non-supportive relationships as being potentially detrimental (Chamberlain *et al.*, 2017; Doekhie *et al.*, 2018). Findings indicate that where supervisory relationships are perceived as supportive, these are more beneficial to the change process; Probation Officers can be instrumental in enabling efforts to desist from offending (Farrall *et al.*, 2014; Rowe and Soppitt, 2014). Such empirical evidence is supported in research commissioned by the official justice system and third-sector reviews of support for desistance (Bevan, 2015; Weaver, 2016). Perceptions of supervision as punitive related to the formal elements of control (for example, frequency of contact, conditions) were cited as a barrier to desistance. Some wider literature (Hucklesby, 2008) suggests that surveillance-based practices can effectively contribute towards desistance through measures such as curfews and electronic monitoring, thus physically removing individuals from criminal networks. Ricks *et al.* (2016) observed that supervisors adjusted their approach depending how the risk of reoffending was perceived, evidencing responsivity and agility relative to perceived risk. Empathy, helpfulness, the ability to listen, and being engaging were attributes probationers valued from their supervisors (Rex, 1999; Bonta *et al.*, 2008). An element of control, cited as 'firmness', also rated highly, suggesting that an authoritative approach is appreciated in a supportive context. Aforementioned qualities and characteristics are understood as prerequisites in a desistance approach, McNeill (2016) further poses that supervision could perhaps be more desistance-orientated through identification and promotion of the strengths of those supervised.

Trotter (2015) emphasised the need to address power imbalances in professional relationships through clear identification of roles and boundaries, yet as McCulloch (2021) asserts, the desister is the primary agent of change, and those supporting them must be attuned and responsive to the interplay of the individual's lived reality and structural adversities. Included studies seem to support this view, suggesting that how practitioners perceive and exercise power within the relationship is a critical contributing factor to desistance (Rex, 1999; Irwin-Rogers, 2017). Relationships appear strengthened when probationers value the legitimacy of their supervisors, a concept supported by the wider literature, with Healy (2012, p. 388) arguing that successful relationships originate from an authentic 'commitment to desistance'. For someone to desist, they must feel engaged and responded to within the supervisory relationship. Practitioners who adopt an authoritative, rather than an authoritarian, approach may achieve more favourable outcomes. Findings are supported by Dominey (2019) who references the idea of 'thick relationships' – those that sustain desistance through supportive networks and structures but are challenged by increasingly disparate, consumerist agendas in the criminal justice sector. However, Dominey and Gelsthorpe (2020) observe that building relationships and developing care, whilst foundational to social work practice, may not be a priority in the risk-focused managerialism that can characterise contemporary criminal justice (Bell, 2011; Sullivan, 2012). Within the wider literature, co-produced approaches that acknowledge the realities of cumulative disadvantage and labelling, and the need to provide infrastructures to enable individuals to realise a desistance journey, are increasingly understood as key 'relationships' and 'support' elements of desistance (Weaver, 2016). Whilst highlighting the need for further research in this area, McCulloch (2021) acknowledges the critical role of co-production in supporting desistance, especially in the context of peer support. However, she cautions against the risk of coercive systems or institutions potentially monopolising user/peer-led support initiatives, which may then be experienced by both supporters and desisters as unsupportive, further labelling and possibly oppressive.

## Risk

The review suggests that assessment of risk may impact upon experiences of desistance. An assessment of 'high risk' can mean intense levels of supervision. Paradoxically, these increased levels of surveillance may lead to probationers failing to comply with such intensive requirements and

ultimately may lead to breaches of their supervision conditions. Furthermore, whilst someone is under intensive supervision, the focus on their specific criminogenic needs may lead to some lower-risk needs going unmet (Lussier and Gress, 2014; Bonta *et al.,* 2008). Thus, supervision through an individualistic 'risk lens' may ignore other needs critical to desisting.

North American/UK studies dominate the research literature, where the Risk-Need-Responsivity model (RNR) prevails (Taxman and Maass, 2016). Studies typically reflected a practice model combining case work and surveillance approaches (Doekhie *et al.,* 2018). Contemporary reviews of the RNR approach (Raynor and Robinson, 2009) have included a focus on the significance of relationships, prosocial modelling, and developing social capital.

Bonta and Andrews (2010) maintain that the 'risk' paradigm acknowledges that recidivism may be decreased if the service response to offending is proportional to the risk/likelihood of reoffending. The 'need' principle, as Andrews *et al.* (2006) contend, requires that interventions be premised upon criminogenic needs – those static and dynamic risk factors attributed to criminal behaviour. As Ward and Maruna (2007) caution, if criminogenic needs are not met, there is an inherent risk of harm; indeed, an unmet need can be considered a form of harm itself. Ultimately, the 'responsivity' principle considers the concept of social-learning interactions, suggesting that any response (intervention) should be aligned to the individual's learning style and their motivation to change (Andrews *et al.,* 1990). Invariably, how risk is identified and responded to by Probation Officers may impact upon how desistance is perceived.

## *Effectiveness*

Included studies identify factors usually implicated in reoffending, such as age, prior drug/violence-related offending, substance misuse, lack of prosocial engagement, and low levels of social capital (Vito *et al.,* 2015; Wan *et al.,* 2015). These findings tally with Smith *et al.'s* (2018) review of the literature on the effectiveness of probation supervision in reducing reoffending, with those involved in a form of supervision less likely to reoffend than those receiving no supervision. Smith *et al's.,* (2018) rapid evidence assessment acknowledged the heterogenous nature of their included studies, with almost no attention to supervisor skill or approach. The effectiveness of the type of supervision provided (type of contact, frequency etc.) is equally unaccounted for in studies included in this current review, with some

potentially contradictory evidence presented (Morash *et al.*, 2016; Chamberlain *et al.*, 2017). What seems even less clear is the extent to which 'desistance' as a guiding concept influences or impacts upon practice within a penal landscape dominated by a narrative of offender management and public protection. As discussed above, Maruna (2017) proposes desistance as a social movement, with Quinn and Cooke (2019) arguing that this necessitates meaningful inputs from those with first-hand experiences of desistance-leading initiatives and influencing policy. To this end, Revolving Door (Mullen *et al.*, 2021) in its *Lived Experience Inquiry into Probation* advocates for those with lived experience having a strategic input into the role of probation supervision. Included studies reference effectiveness through the arguably narrow frame of recidivism. Gender emerges as under-researched with limited attention to the unique factors that impact on women's desistance (Morash *et al.,* 2016; Stone *et al.,* 2018).

## Conclusion

The twenty-year scope of the reviewed literature highlights that the task probation services face in reducing offending is tougher than ever, with risk management continuing to dominate in practice. However, in this context, key themes have emerged regarding how supervision impacts on desistance in practice. Supervision offers an opportunity to create a new identity, one distanced from a past marred by offending. Supportive supervisory relationships, as opposed to non-supportive/surveillance-orientated relationships, appear most conducive to fostering desistance. Perhaps predictably, a surveillance approach is considered essential where the objective is risk management in protecting the public from further harm. How probation services respond to risk invariably impacts upon perspectives of desistance; labelling and the stigma of involvement with criminal justice systems are hugely impactful. Finally, supervision's effectiveness in reducing offending is well established, yet the effectiveness of the type and quality of the prescribed supervision is less known.

However, conceptualisations remain problematic; whilst the ethos of desistance appears aligned with objectives of probation supervision (a reduction of recidivism rates), a lack of clarity persists in how it is operationalised in practice. The extent to which 'desistance' influences practice within a penal landscape dominated by a narrative of offender management and public protection remains unclear. Furthermore, critics

have argued that desistence is misappropriated and over-simplified in the rhetoric of criminal justice management (Weaver, 2019), with minimal attention to research on under-investigated factors such as type of offence, gender, culture and disability. Critically, a significant gap exists in the knowledge base surrounding Probation Officers' own perspectives of desistance, on an individual and systems level. Future research could explore how Probation Officers perceive their role in facilitating desistance for those they supervise, and provide new insights into this critical process.

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