



Aging bodies and desistance from crime: Insights from the life stories of offenders



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ABSTRACT

The processes involved in the transition from crime to desistance, in relation to how those involved in criminal activity give meaning to their experiences of aging over time, has received little empirical scrutiny in the criminological literature. In this article, we unpack and flesh out the multiple meanings of age by drawing on a life story study of desistance from crime. Our analysis foregrounds the following key themes and the interactive parts they play in the process of desistance: general perceptions of aging (critical ages and the ambiguity of age); the significance of the aging body (crime as a young person's game, tiredness, and slowing down); age and risk assessment; and feelings of missing out and lost time with age. We conclude by suggesting that researchers into the phenomenon of desistance with an interest in maturation theory might benefit from integrating work undertaken in the sociology of embodiment and critical gerontology. A brief example of how this integration might operate is provided.

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Introduction

According to McNeill, Farrall, Lightowler, and Maruna (2012), desistance from crime involves 'the long-term abstinence from criminal behaviour among those for whom offending has become a pattern of behaviour' (p. 3). They note that producing or encouraging desistance is the implicit focus of much criminal justice policy, research and practice, and it is identified as one of the key outcomes that justice interventions are designed to achieve. Accordingly, much research treats reducing or ending offending as a key measure of effectiveness. This said, McNeill and his colleagues point out, 'there is little agreement on the definition and measurement of desistance from crime. Some see desistance as a permanent

cessation of offending over several years, whilst others take an arguably more fluid definition of desistance, accepting that episodes of re-offending may occur' (p. 3). There is, however, some agreement that desistance is best viewed as a process rather than a state (i.e., an abrupt cessation of criminal behaviour) and that it is not an irreversible transition. It can be considered a "zigzag" and "curved" path with crime and non-crime cycles and combines stopping and staying stopped (Carlsson, 2012; Ezell, 2007; Leibrich, 1993; Kazemian & Maruna, 2009; Shapland & Bottoms, 2011). Desistance from crime, therefore, can best be conceptualised as a dynamic, non-linear, on-going process that can involve lapses and relapses.

Various theoretical explanations have been provided for desistance from crime. One of these is the *maturational reform* theory that evolved from the pioneering work of Harvard Criminologists Glueck and Glueck (1937) who, having studied criminality across the life course, stated that aging was the only factor to emerge as significant in the reformative process and that the gradual movement away from crime with age was due to maturation or maturational reform. This theory focuses on the

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links between age and the 'growing out' or 'burn out' from crime due to time and maturation and emphasises the psychosocial and physiological maturation processes considered crucial in leading to 'dampening' effects on crime participation.

Despite its early appeal, the work of the Gluecks came under heavy criticism. For example, [Wootton \(1962\)](#) argued that their version of maturation theory posited law-like or mechanical process of the criminal career, and that their explanations were circular (once a person stops offending, they have reached maturity). Thus, it is not an explanation but a description of something that needs to be explained. Such critiques led to the demise of this theory. [Rocque \(2014\)](#) notes, however, that while certain aspects of the critique were well founded, the Glueck's theory is more viable than many realise.

For example, the notion of "maturational reform" is not necessarily tautological (they did attempt to define maturation independently of criminal behavior). In addition, their notion of maturation seemingly foresaw several developments in criminology, cognitive psychology, and neurological sciences that have recently helped to advance our understanding of behavioral change in adulthood. ([Rocque, 2014, p. 4](#)).

According to [Rocque \(2014\)](#), while the literature on desistance from crime has increased significantly since the Glueck's time, the theories or explanations that have emerged each contain elements of what may be called maturation. The most obvious of these is what Rocque calls 'pure age-based theories' that offer explanations of the age–crime curve based solely on age as a factor. For example, [Hirschi and Gottfredson \(1983\)](#) and [Gottfredson and Hirschi \(1990\)](#) argue that age directly impacts on crime in that crime declines with age. For them, this robust variable suggests a natural and direct effect that occurs regardless of other circumstances and cannot be explained by any cultural, social or psychological factors. In view of this, such theories do not feel inclined to consider social or institutional processes nor do they feel the need to reflect on the subjective meanings of age for those concerned ([Maruna, 2001](#)). [Rocque \(2014\)](#) also points out the following.

The implication of the "pure-age" perspective on desistance is that maturational reform is "normative" in that it happens for everyone and it happens at generally the same rate. Thus, factors that vary across individuals (such as social relationships) do not have a significant impact on behavioral reform. As such, these theories remain unsatisfactory in helping to understand desistance. ([Rocque, 2014, p. 5](#)).

In direct contrast to pure age and maturational reform theories are what might be classed as social relationship, social role and life transition theories. Included here would be the leading proponents of social control theory, [Sampson and Laub \(1993\)](#), who believe that social bonds provide individuals with a stake in conformity and a reason to avoid crime. For them, social processes such as, work, marriage and involvement in education, military or religious institutions provide key turning points in the life course and are central to explaining changes in criminality over time. In developing their age-graded life-course theory, [Laub and Sampson \(2003\)](#) came to view desistance as a complex process occurring over time that depends on structured routine activities (e.g., employment,

associating with law-abiding peers), social controls (bonds with family and friends) and human agency. Thus, desistance resides in the interface of developing personal maturity, changing social bonds associated with certain life transitions and the individual subjective narratives and identity ([McNeill, 2006](#)). Supporting this view, [Massoglia and Uggen \(2010\)](#) argue that marriage, employment and desistance from criminal activity are part of traditional adult status markers, while [Carlsson \(2012\)](#) confirms that processes of 'family formation, stable employment, the disintegration of peer groups and subjective shifts in identity are changes that tend to emerge at certain stages in the life and have been shown to be important for understanding changes in offending' (p. 1).

[Sampson and Laub \(1993\)](#) acknowledge that the mechanisms underlying the relationships between social ties and desistance are not well understood and precisely why, for example, marriage and employment should reduce crime is unknown ([Laub & Sampson, 2003](#), [Sampson, Laub, & Wimer, 2006](#)). Reflecting on such issues in relation to the centrality of turning points in desistance from crime, [Carlsson \(2012\)](#) comments as follows.

A turning point thus constitutes a change in the life course, which, in turn, constitutes a change in the individual's offending. It is not employment, marriage, military service, residential change or other changes in themselves that bring about desistance, but rather the way such changes under certain circumstances can bring about other changes, which are theoretically understood as central for the desistance processes to emerge. ([Carlsson, 2012, p. 3](#)).

These 'other changes' that [Carlsson \(2012\)](#) alludes to are the focus of attention of what [Rocque \(2014\)](#) describes as cognitive transformation, agency, and identity theories. These theories are cognitive-based, subjective explanations of how individuals change their outlook on themselves with desistance occurring when offenders no longer regard themselves as criminals ([Paternoster & Bushway, 2009](#); [Rumgay, 2004](#)). For example, [Maruna \(2001\)](#) points to the importance of self-identity in the desistance process and argues that 'to desist from crime, ex-offenders need to develop a coherent, pro-social identity for themselves' (p. 7). This involves a cognitive re-scripting in which individuals reshape their perceptions of their past selves in order to conform to who they believe they are now. As part of this process, identity changes or cognitive shifts may result that lead the individual to purposefully pursue different lines of behaviour that can ultimately lead to desistance. In relation to [Maruna's](#) work, [Rocque \(2014\)](#) notes that it also demonstrates that identity is not entirely an internal phenomenon, but one that is shaped by outside factors.

According to [Rocque \(2014\)](#), the most compelling identity theory has been offered by [Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph \(2002\)](#). They suggest that the environment provides what they describe as a 'scaffolding' or 'hooks for change' that can facilitate desistance but emphasise that ultimately the individual must do the work. In outlining their four-part model of cognitive transformation, [Giordano et al.](#) argue that the desistance process involves the following: a 'general cognitive openness to change'; exposure and reaction to 'hooks for change' or turning points; the envisioning of an appealing and conventional 'replacement self'; and a transformation in the

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