



# An integrative theory of desistance from sex offending

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## ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that most offenders eventually desist from committing further crimes, there is an absence of comprehensive psychological and social accounts of the desistance process, beginning at the point when an individual decides to stop further offending, and finishing at the point of successful reentry and social reintegration. Building on previous work, the Integrated Theory of Desistance from Sex Offending represents an attempt to advance our understanding of desistance. The theory describes the desistance process in four phases: (1) decisive momentum (initial desistance), (2) rehabilitation (promoting desistance), (3) re-entry (maintaining desistance), and (4) normalcy (successful maintenance of desistance over a long period of time). The theory has significant implications for further theorizing, empirical research, clinical practice, and policy making.

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## 1. Introduction

While it is becoming increasingly apparent that well designed intervention programs can reduce reoffending rates, it is not clear *why* individuals cease offending (Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Laws & Ward, 2011). The situation is further complicated by research indicating that most offenders eventually stop offending without professional help from correctional or mental health practitioners (Farrall & Calverley, 2006; Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Laws & Ward, 2011; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Serin & Lloyd, 2009). In recent years, researchers have examined the role of social and psychological variables in encouraging individuals

to cease further offending, and in particular, have concentrated on social relationships, self-narrative changes, and maturational factors (Laws & Ward, 2011). More specifically, age (crime rates drop off as offenders age), intimate relationships (e.g., marriage), social support, work and job stability, juvenile detention, prison, education, cognitive transformation, high expectations from others (i.e., the “Pygmalion Effect”), being able to cut one’s bonds to the criminal past (“knifing off”), spirituality, fear of serious assault or death, sickness and incapacitation, and military service have all been associated with desistance from offending (see Laws & Ward, 2011).

Researchers agree that desistance from offending is not a unitary event, and is more usefully conceptualized as a gradual process with a number of false starts finally culminating in cessation of all offending (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Maruna, 2001). Understanding the desistance process in detail is likely to provide valuable knowledge for risk assessment procedures and inform treatment staff and

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policy makers about how to best proceed with offenders. It makes sense to investigate how correctional interventions can promote desistance or exert a positive influence on offenders who manage to remain crime-free. Critical questions include: What changes occur during, and between, the time of detection and the completion of formal sanctions? Are changes promoted by treatment, or are they a consequence of a decision by the offender to desist? Is desistance a function of a combination of treatment and the intention to change? What do we know about the transition process? Whereas the literature on initiation and continuation of crime is massive, little work has been undertaken to examine the change process at an integrative (i.e., psychological and criminological findings) level. Further, most desistance research has been undertaken by criminologists and very little by psychologists. This has resulted in considerable attention being paid to social and environmental variables and relatively little to psychological factors involved in desistance. For example, Farrall, Sharpe, Hunter, and Calverley's (2011) excellent recent integration of macro-level structures and meso-level influences, and individual agency within a desistance framework, does not sufficiently attend to the psychological mechanisms involved.

A notable exception is the work done by Serin and Lloyd (2009) and Serin, Lloyd, and Hanby (2010). Serin and colleagues attempted to integrate various research findings from the criminology and psychology literature into a model of the offender desistance process. Their model begins with individuals' commitment to change and its relationship to treatment readiness, and also takes into account the role of internal and external factors in reentry and reintegration. However, the variables involved in the establishment of a commitment to change, and the mechanisms associated with the establishment of internal and external factors are not clarified. In addition, there is little detail on the influence of offender agency and the associated shifts in self-narratives that appear to be associated with successful desistance (Laws & Ward, 2011).

In short, our analysis of existing theory and research on offender desistance reveals that there is an absence of comprehensive psychological and social accounts of the whole desistance process, beginning at the point when an individual decides to stop further offending, and finishing at the point of successful reentry and social reintegration. Our aim in this paper is to outline a theory of desistance that covers all of the phases of desistance and incorporates important insights of current models (Farrall & Calverley, 2006; Giordano et al., 2002; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). The theory presented in this paper builds on this work and is intended to be complementary rather than conflicting. The competing theories will not be described in more detail due to space constraints. However, the central assumptions of most relevance for the *Integrated Theory of Desistance from Sex Offending* (ITDSO) will be outlined in the text. The ITDSO describes the desistance process in four phases: (1) decisive momentum (initial desistance), (2) rehabilitation (promoting desistance), (3) re-entry (maintaining desistance), and (4) normalcy (successful maintenance of desistance over a long period of time). Although the theory aims to account for the desistance process in sex offenders, because this is where our expertise resides, it is also intended to be applicable to other types of offenders (i.e., male general and violent offenders, female offenders, adolescent offenders). Before describing each phase of the ITDSO, we briefly outline the features of a good theory of offender desistance.

### 1.1. Features of a good theory of offender desistance

In our view, a comprehensive theory of desistance ought to exhibit a number of features derived from the empirical and theoretical research literature. This is both a normative (i.e., specifies the desirable features of a theory) and empirical requirement (i.e., accounts for the facts of desistance as they are currently accepted). To adequately account for

desistance from sex offending, a comprehensive desistance theory should be *dynamic* with regard to *function and structure*. That is, the theory should be responsive to the dependence of desistance on the interplay between internal and external variables and also describe the mechanisms and processes underpinning this complex phenomenon. The mechanisms involved include: *psychological* processes (e.g., cognition, self processes, emotions, and values); *environmental* processes (e.g., opportunities, life circumstances); and *social* processes (e.g., marriage, job). Another crucial feature is the attention to *offender agency*. In a comprehensive perspective, offenders should be conceptualized as agented subjects, rather than beings passively determined by external circumstances. However, besides human agency, *natural desistance* or "*luck*" should not be neglected. Natural desistance can be defined as desistance that occurs independently of the impact of correctional practice (e.g., treatment programs). Natural desistance moments occur when the offender is offered employment or is involved in a strong romantic relationship, for instance (Laws & Ward, 2011). In addition, it is accepted among desistance researchers that desistance is a process rather than a discrete point in time. Therefore, it is necessary to include a *temporal dimension* reflecting this characteristic, namely: turning points, rehabilitation, return to the community, and reintegration/normalcy.

## 2. The Integrated Theory of Desistance from Sex Offending (ITDSO)

### 2.1. Phase I: decisive momentum

Laub and Sampson (2003) postulate that factors like marriage, work, and military service are turning points that promote desistance. Turning points make it possible for an individual to 'knife off' the (criminal) past from the present, to invest in new relationships that enhance social support, to be under direct and indirect social control, to engage in routine activities constituting a conventional life, and to undergo an identity transformation (Sampson & Laub, 2005). In the ITDSO, the concept of a turning point phase is substituted with the idea of *decisive momentum*. The term *momentum* is borrowed from physics to indicate that desistance is a process that involves a redirection of activities, like a vector in a three dimensional space. This concept is less static than the conceptualization of turning points and indicates that criminal desistance is not a discrete point in time. Despite the presence of such opportunities, if the offender does not decide to take advantage of them, change is unlikely. It is important to emphasize that capitalizing on decisive momentum is only possible if a person is open to change. This means that the offender must possess the cognitive and emotional capacities necessary to profit from desistance opportunities. The concept of decisive momentum also implies that a turning point may stimulate change, but it is equally likely that change is the outcome of other processes such as nascent identity transformation (LeBel, Burnett, Maruna, & Bushway, 2008). The concept of a turning point is used in this paper to refer to specific events that are associated with change while the term *decisive momentum* refers to the entire first phase of the desistance process.

This phase is similar to Prochaska and DiClemente's *contemplation* stage of behavior change (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1982). The offender starts to see his offending behavior as problematic and considers the possibility of change. As part of this reflection he or she might engage in consciousness raising (i.e., increasing the information about self and problem behaviors) and environmental re-evaluation (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1982; Tierney & McCabe, 2001).

Fig. 1 provides an overview of the first phase of desistance. According to the ITDSO, a *life event* (see Fig. 1) is a significant event in a person's life, and can be positive or negative. Life events have been shown to be associated with different patterns of change in identity commitment and exploration (Anthis & LaVoie, 2006). A life event can be a *catalyst of change*, because of its capacity to create momentum for change (Burrowes & Needs, 2009). However, the

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