

### Book review

**Healy, Deirdre (2012) *The Dynamics of Desistance: Charting Pathways through Change*, Abingdon: Routledge.**

**ISBN 978-1-84392-783-9 (hbk., £80-00); 978-0-415-62805-1 (pbk., £24-95)**

Desistance, which is defined in the General Editors' introduction as 'how and why people stop offending and how they can be more effectively integrated into the communities and societies to which they belong' (p.ix), has increasingly become the focus of attention for criminologists. Research led desistance studies carry compelling messages about how those working within criminal justice can support (ex-)offenders in their pathways away from crime. This book 'explores the nexus between social and personal forces in the desistance process' (p.xi) and makes a significant contribution to the field.

Healy conducted research with a sample of 73 adult male clients of the probation service in Dublin during 2003-4. All participants were persistent offenders. The research criteria limited the diversity of the group, for example there are no women, but this is compensated for by achieving a sufficiently large and coherent sample for the purposes of analysis. The most common current offences of the participants were robbery, drug offences, larceny / theft and assault (sex offenders were excluded).

The particular contribution of this study lies in the way in which Healy has managed to capture a group of offenders on the cusp of change; most wanted to stop offending and many were beginning desisters in what she describes as the 'liminal' period. What emerges is a nuanced and messy picture. As a former probation officer, I found the ambivalence and struggle of the participants in the study true to my experience, with many quotations that are vividly authentic. Porporino (2010, pp.62, 70), in a review and critique of evidence based What Works and desistance studies, which he describes as a 'counter-movement [to What Works] now also in full swing', notes that the desistance 'literature is not neat and tidy --- It is a large, growing and daunting literature' that does not provide 'nice little tools we can apply'. What it does instead is face up to the complexity in people's lives as they make choices constrained by their own capacities and circumstances. From this, a message for practitioners emerges, namely one of 'listening to offenders and respecting them as people with important stories to tell' (McNeil, 2004, p.243) if practitioners are to capture those opportunities when the client is looking for support, guidance and help in their efforts to change.

Healy's book reflects its PhD origins and it can be dense; on occasion it is frankly difficult to see the wood for the trees. But overall, the writing style is clear and approachable. The first two chapters provide a thorough literature review. Chapter 3 introduces the research and sets the scene in Ireland. Healy uses qualitative and quantitative methods, combining the use of three well

established psychometric tools with semi-structured interviews; probation officers were also interviewed and the study is well triangulated. There was a four year follow up, using official reconviction data. The chapter contains an exemplary discussion of the research design and its pros and cons. For teachers of research methods, I recommend this chapter as an excellent introduction to the practical application of social science research methods and why the seemingly arcane debates around methodology are actually very important.

Chapters 4-6 present the analysis and findings. These are often complex, even appearing contradictory – Porporino’s words, quoted above, ring true – but Healy provides discursive / explanatory passages to help the reader through and she is good at providing succinct summaries. Recognising that desistance is a process, not a single event, and subject to relapse, a distinction is drawn between primary and secondary desisters. This creates three groups within her sample and she makes a convincing case for adopting this approach: current offenders, primary desisters who self-reported no offending for at least a month, secondary desisters who self-reported no offending for at least a year (p.61). However, I found it difficult to follow how she applied this grouping to some of her subsequent analysis – for example, how there were 24 secondary desisters (crime free for at least a year, p.64), 45 primary desisters (crime free for at least a month but presumably less than a year, p.67) and 28 offenders (committed at least one offence in the previous month, p.67) in a sample of 73. In order to explain the approach taken, Healy needed to provide a clear introductory statement on how the sample was divided for the purposes of different parts of the analysis and, unfortunately, I found this has not really been done.

Putting this to one side, the discussion is rich and full of insight. Chapter 4 analyses the results from the psychometric tests, which identify ‘the factors associated with desistance but could not explore how or why people change’ (p.77) – the key questions that the next two chapters open up with participants’ narrative accounts of their ‘pathways through change’. Differences between primary and secondary desistance narratives are discussed with particular emphasis given to the ‘liminal period’. Chapter 7 looks at the role afforded the probation service in participants’ accounts. The Irish service is still a social work service, there to ‘advise, assist and befriend’, and it remains welfare and community oriented. This gives great added interest for readers from more punitively inclined jurisdictions. Chapter 8 sets out the 4 year follow up study, which indeed found that “currently offending” at the time of interview were more likely to be reconvicted and were reconvicted at a higher rate than primary desisters’ (p.157), with similar patterns being observed for secondary desisters. Across the sample as a whole there was a decline in seriousness of offending. Finally, chapter 9 presents a summary of the findings in the light of existing research and theory and explores the implications for practice.

The factors that are relevant to desistance in Healy’s research are clearly affected by a person’s stage in the process. She found that static factors, such as age and onset of criminality, are important in the early stages of desistance but their long term influence declines as people ‘break free from the determining influences of their pasts’ (p.160). Similarly, ‘more dynamic cognitive factors, such as attitudes and thinking styles, rarely cast a lengthy shadow over the life course’ (p.159), whereas they were important during the early stages. What develops through the zigzag process of desistance is cumulative: ‘as each discrete episode of primary desistance occurs, it contributes to the generation of a momentum towards enduring change’ (p.174). Healy sums up the characteristics of those who maintain themselves in desistance compared with offenders (p.177). They have higher levels of self-efficacy, better coping skills, better support mechanisms

(and are ready to use them), greater commitment to change, ability to learn from, rather than reject, their criminal pasts, clear conventional identities and confidence that they can attain them. They are realistic about the obstacles to desistance, which can be considerable, and have confidence they will be able to deal with them. Desisters' narratives were important in building these non-offending self-identities but Healy did not find that generativity and 'redemptive scripts' featured in the way they do in the Liverpool Desistance Study (Maruna *et al.*, 2004). Her intriguing explanation (pp.176-8) is that such redemptive scripts are developed as retrospective accounts by people already established in desistance, whereas Healy was listening to people's prospective accounts, at the start of the process, which, while expressing personal agency, are more hesitant and modest. However, on the four year follow up, she did find a link between those desisters who expressed some degree of generativity at interview and low subsequent levels of reconviction. Through all this detail, two theoretical frameworks, it seems to me, have particular resonance: labelling (and de-labelling) theory (pp.14-15, 78; see also Maruna *et al.*, 2009) balanced by the cycle of change upon which motivational interviewing is built (pp.12-13, 173-6; see also Porporino, pp.64, 75-6).

What lessons can practitioners and policy makers take from this research? It shows how ill advised and potentially counter-productive the managerialist, risk focused punitive turn in policy is. Yet these trends are evident again in England and Wales in the government's latest proposals for community sentences and the probation service (Ministry of Justice, 2012a, b & c; see also NAPO, 2012a & b). The proposals reveal a fixation with punishment and talking tough. To comment on a selection of these proposals: a policy of privatisation and multiple providers will fragment the integrity of the professional relationship; allocation of clients to non-public services on the basis of 'lower risk' ignores the volatile and dynamic nature of risk; payment by results calculated on reconviction rates falsely assumes a linear causal relationship between the intervention programme and reconviction; a punitive element in every order as a statutory requirement risks undermining the legitimacy of sentencing through gratuitous punishment; and multiple requirements attached to orders, with expensive satellite tracking and electronic monitoring swallowing up resources, could increase breaches and the number of destructive short prison sentences. Meanwhile, the welcome proposed expansion of restorative justice, which will require delicacy, trust and patience in its execution, sits uncomfortably alongside the punitive rhetoric; references to the equally welcome policy of increasing probation officers' discretion over compliance diminish almost out of sight; and the government appears remarkably reluctant to trumpet its own progressive reforms to the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act (the Act is about the required time limits on declaring convictions).

Probation works best if it is in a supporting role to clients' own efforts to change: 'probation may act as a "hook" for change which, if deemed meaningful and accessible by the probationer, can engender desistance' (p.147). The quality of the relationship is crucial and, as Farrall (2002) found and Healy endorses, this support can be particularly valuable if it is outward looking – working with the family, building positive social capital and achieving reintegration into the community. Healy refers to two participants in her study. One, on a suspended sentence, faced the near certainty of a lengthy prison sentence. Having nothing to lose, he went out on an offending spree (p.99). The other, on a suspended sentence, realised how close he had come to the near certainty of a lengthy prison sentence. The shock jolted him into desistance (p.80):

Then me aul fella gave me a lecture about me young fella and all --- He said more or less, you can either get locked up or you can try and make your life fuckin' half decent, you know.

Punishment can cut both ways and has the most tendentious connection to reoffending. What can be done by those involved in rehabilitation, which must surely include probation officers, is to learn from offenders' own stories, listen to what they have to tell us and respond with respect and support to the cues they provide about their desire to desist.

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