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BELONGING, DESISTANCE AND CORRECTIONS

Fergus McNeill & Marguerite Schinkel,
University of Glasgow, Scotland

Abstract

This short paper explains the development and importance of the concept of tertiary (or relational) desistance, which relates to securing acceptance and belonging in a community after criminalisation and punishment. The paper presents evidence from a range of recent studies that have studied tertiary desistance empirically, before going on to discuss the implications for correctional policy and practice.

Keywords: Desistance, rehabilitation, re-entry, reintegration, corrections

Introduction

In the last 25 years or so, evidence about how and why people desist from offending has grown rapidly, and that evidence base has begun to inform the development of criminal justice policy and practice in many jurisdictions, albeit to different degrees and in different ways. Previously, we tended to describe approaches as 'evidence-based' only on the basis of evaluative evidence of their effectiveness. Now, desistance research has helped us understand not only whether or not a policy or an intervention 'works', but also *how and why* desistance happens, with or without any correctional intervention (for a summary of these debates and of this evidence, see McNeill et al., 2012).

The desistance literature has also stimulated discussion of how we should measure movement away from offending, through desistance, towards the ultimate outcome of successful social integration. While reconviction rates remain one important metric, increasingly, it is being argued that more attention should be paid – in research, policy and practice -- to means and markers of social integration, such as positive employment and education outcomes, secure housing, and better health and wellbeing (cf. Ager & Strang, 2004, 2008; Kirkwood & McNeill, 2015; McNeill, 2021). Achieving these outcomes seems very important not just in securing longer term desistance from crime (cf. Laub & Sampson, 2003), but also in helping people enjoy a life that is good and productive for them, and that makes a contribution to the wellbeing of others.

These arguments are reflected in important distinctions that have been made between primary, secondary and tertiary desistance (also commonly referred to as act, identity and relational desistance) (cf. Maruna & Farrall, 2004; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016; McNeill 2014, 2015; McNeill & Schinkel, 2024). In simple terms, primary (or act) desistance refers to the absence of further offending behaviour; secondary (or identity) desistance relates to changes in self-concept and identity associated with leaving the label 'offender' behind; and tertiary (or relational) desistance refers to securing acceptance and belonging within a community; it is about how one is seen by others and 'how one sees one's place in society' (McNeill, 2015: 201). Nugent and Schinkel (2016) add further nuance by distinguishing between micro-level, meso-level and macro-level aspects of tertiary (or, in their terms, relational) desistance. These refer in turn to the roles in securing acceptance and belonging of inter-personal relations (micro), community relations (meso) and socio-structural dynamics (macro). Nugent and Schinkel (2016) also note that while primary, secondary and tertiary desistance are certainly inter-related, they do not necessarily follow a linear sequence. For example, rather than behavioural change triggering changes in identity and belonging, it may be acceptance in a new social group that triggers a change in self-understanding which triggers a change in behaviour. Figure 1 represents these non-linear interactions.

In recent years, empirical evidence about the importance of tertiary (or relational) desistance – and of securing social integration – has emerged from many different jurisdictions. In this short paper, I briefly review some of this evidence and then ask what its implications might be for correctional services (for a more extended discussion, see McNeill and Schinkel, 2024).

Tertiary Desistance: The evidence so far[1]

Villeneuve, Dufour and Farrall (2020) draw on the findings of a scoping review on 'Assisted Desistance

1 *This section of the paper is an abridged version of part of McNeill and Schinkel's (2024) paper, re-used with permission from the editors and the authors.*

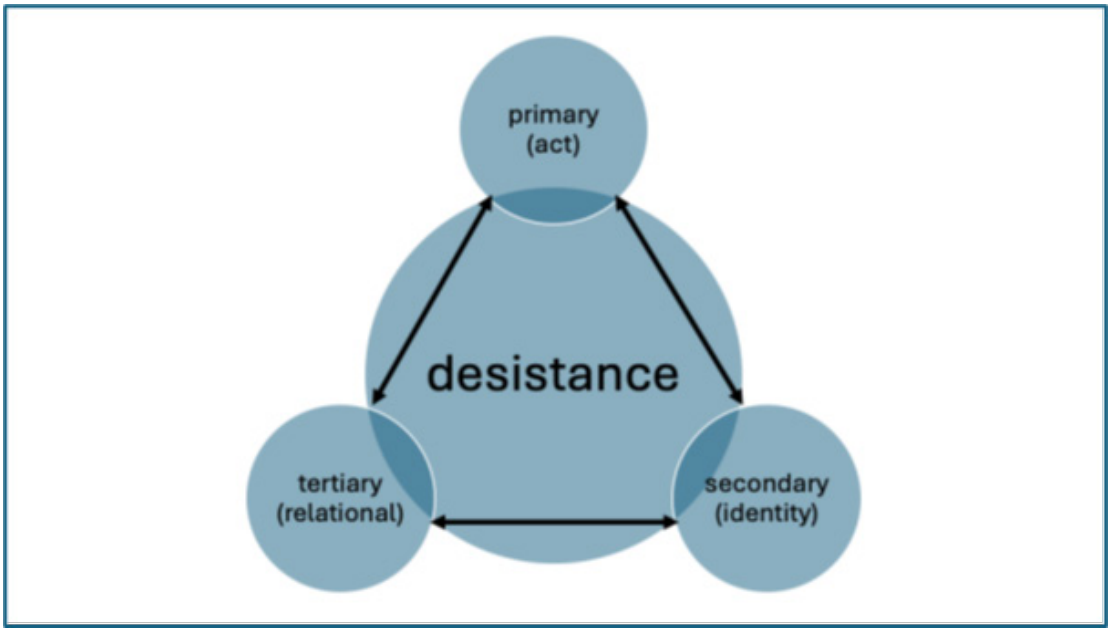

Figure 1: Three dimensions of desistance

in Formal Settings' to argue that the notion of tertiary desistance may help us understand practice mechanisms that can support change efforts:

> 'Positive feedback in the form of staying committed, encouraging change, acknowledging successes, working with, seeing would-be desisters as 'citizens' (not offenders), all emerge as components of assisted desistance. Those components are consistent with the definition of tertiary desistance proposed by McNeill (2014, 2016)... Formal change agents can help would-be desisters rebuild meaningful intra- and inter-personal ties thus contributing to bridge the gaps between 'offenders' and wider society' (Villeneuve, et al., 2022: 96).

So, while professional helpers may not themselves be in a position to provide the belonging and social acceptance required for tertiary desistance, they can play an important role at the micro-level in supporting and sustaining change and in helping people move towards social integration.

In a Dutch study of men's experiences of parole supervision, Doekhie, et al., (2018) arrived at somewhat similar conclusions. About one-third of the men interviewed reported receiving some form of recognition for their desistance efforts from their parole supervisor; and this recognition could be powerful. As one respondent reported:

> 'Isaac: She is the only person who believed in me. (..) She showed me she was not just a PO [parole officer], but a person [...] She gave me confidence not to do stupid things. Because I will make it on my own, but it's hard to believe it yourself. You have a label, so relapsing is easy. Hanging in there is the hard part. And she motivated me "don't blow it! Think about what you want and what you want is what you are going to do!"' (Doekhie, et al., 2018: 509).

Here, as the authors note, the parole officer's recognition of Isaac's potential and of his efforts to change helps him to recognise and to trust himself to become the person he aspires to be, thereby also strengthening his identity desistance. These positive experiences, however, were not the norm: most parolees in the study experienced supervision as being mainly surveillance-oriented and not very helpful for desistance, but where officers like Isaac's were seen as 'mentors... [who] used their discretionary power to adjust conditions, creating space for trial and error' (Doekhie, et al., 2018: 491), their influence was notable.

Ugelvik (2022) also examines the role of correctional staff and others in supporting tertiary desistance, drawing on findings from the Oslo Re-Entry Study (ORES). His analysis focuses on the 'transformative power of trust', particularly within the context of risk-oriented penal institutions that tend to construct people as untrustworthy. Drawing on several examples, he concludes that:

> 'The experience of being trusted can lead to hope and the belief that a better future is possible, post-release. Trust that is acted upon can therefore be seen as a practical and specific way for individuals to experience being recognized as fellow human beings, and not just as offenders. From such a perspective, trust can be an important part of the process leading to tertiary desistance' (Ugelvik, 2022: 635).

Ugelvik (2022: 635) suggests that trusting relationships not just with professionals, but also with family, friends and (new) colleagues are built slowly through the desistance process in an active process of 'negotiation between desisters and their social environments'. The potency of trust in supporting desistance may arise at least partly because criminalised people so rarely receive the recognition that trust confers.

Gålnander's (2020) Swedish respondents fared less well. His was a prospective longitudinal study that followed the desistance processes of 10 women all of whom had long histories of involvement with street crime related to substance use issues. As Gålnander (2020: 1307) notes, '[a]ll ten women had spent decades as outsiders, segregated and excluded from mainstream society'. Most had grown up in poverty; many had been in the care of the state as children and/or had been imprisoned. They had little experience of education or employment. Most had post-traumatic stress disorders; in five cases this was related to repeated violent victimisation by intimate partners. In other words, at the outset of the study, these women were a long way from experiencing belonging in mainstream society. As one woman put it: 'I feel like I don't even know how to be – I mean, what do they talk about, normal people?' (Gålnander, 2020: 1307). Yet, partly because of strained or non-existent relationships with their families, they were compelled to attempt to move in that direction, making stigma management a major concern.

One of the main ways the women tackled this problem was by keeping secrets; by avoiding discussions of their pasts. Such was the gendered stigmatisation that they had experienced (and that they feared) that they were unable to mobilise their recovery or desistance as an asset in finding a community in which they might be accepted, even celebrated, as a (typically male) 'wounded healer' (McNeill and Maruna, 2007).

Ultimately, Gålnander (2020: 1316) concludes that:

> '...anticipation of further stigma stemming from internalization of multidimensional stigma in relation to their pasts restricted or even prohibited some of the women from interacting with mainstream society... the women were convinced that little to no good could come of displaying discreditable information when approaching conventional society. This made them avoid socializing, thereby isolating themselves from mainstream society.'

Gålnander's work helps us understand why and how the gendered (and therefore structural) dynamics of stigmatisation create major obstacles to even attempting far less securing belonging within a new community. For the women in his study, tertiary desistance seemed a remote prospect.

Rutter and Barr (2021) draw similar conclusions from a comparison of their two independent narrative studies of women's experiences of desistance in northern England: the stigmatisation of criminalised women as offenders, 'bad' women and mothers, *and* as victims meant that it was difficult for them to see themselves and be seen in any other way, limiting the extent to which they could achieve tertiary or relational desistance.

Barr and Hart (2022) take these arguments further, suggesting that 're/integration' into conventional society is often neither desirable nor possible for criminalised women. In particular, they contest the sometimes uncritical promotion of tertiary or relational desistance in ways which effectively responsibilize women (for changing themselves, their social relations and their lives) while denying them the structural support they need and deserve. They also criticise desistance scholars for failing to adequately critique the ways in which the prison and the wider criminal justice system often frustrate and obstruct desistance.

Similar arguments about the importance of structural contexts emerge from Gormally's (2015) research on youth gangs in Glasgow (Scotland). She stresses how, in seeking to 'retire' from gang involvement, it is crucially important for her participants to be recognised by those around them, and to have access to other identities and roles within the local community in order to achieve long-term desistance. She highlights how the macro-level of tertiary or relational desistance is important in shaping people's journeys – arguing that policy makers should be careful not to label all groups of young people socialising as gangs and that there should be greater investment in youth services, intergenerational programmes and opportunities for education and employment. Giving people access to alternative sources of identity at a younger age might allow for earlier desistance from street fighting – the type of offending behaviour most associated with these gangs.

More promisingly, in a very different context and with a very different population, Fox (2015) describes what *is* possible in terms of community inclusion, even for acutely stigmatised people, when community members and criminal justice agencies are willing to be play an active part in creating the right conditions for reentry. Researching Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) in Vermont, USA, Fox found that volunteers, by being willing to help with practical needs, by providing feedback and by sharing their own struggles, were able to help the core members see themselves beyond their offence, thereby counteracting the punitive and negative messages that exist on the macro-level of society and that produce and reinforce stigmatised identities. As one core-member said:

> 'They kind of like helped me to see that there's more than just . . . the way that I see myself or

the way that I see that the world sees me because it's not all there is' (Fox, 2015: 90).

Importantly, sharing moral space also led to accountability, rather than a risk-based focus or control, and there was a sense of self-fulfilling prophecy that core members could become a force for good in their communities.

This notion – of progressively enabling people to become community assets – also recurs in Albertson and Hall's (2019) study. They apply a social capital lens to tertiary desistance, examining how a project for military veterans in recovery from addictions allowed them to build increasing relationships and have positive impacts beyond their immediate group. While the basis for the project's work was building relationships with people in a similar situation (mutual aid in group meetings), gradated opportunities were built upon this foundation. Participants could become involved in reaching out to other agencies to give talks, in other forms of civic engagement, in volunteering with other groups and in representing the group at community events. They could also become involved in seeking to influence decision- making at a local and national level. These were described as steps towards generativity (Maruna, 2001) and the restoration of the veterans' citizenship. In later work based on the same research (Albertson & Albertson 2023), these steps towards greater social capital are mapped against the different levels of relational desistance (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016): from the micro (relationships between group members), to the meso (linking with other services and volunteering in the community) to the macro (input into regional and national service delivery decision making).

Taken together, these studies reveal not just the complex relationships between identity change and social reaction, but also the dynamic interactions between micro-level acceptance and recognition, much rarer meso-level opportunities for and experiences of community engagement, and macro-level structures that either generate or, more commonly, frustrate these opportunities. Crucially, they also suggest how (social) structure and (personal) agency interact in these processes, creating different relational possibilities for differently situated people (cf. Farrall & Bowling, 1999). For example, the women in Gålnander's (2020) study seem to have internalised their gendered stigmatisation in a way that makes the building of new social relationships an inherently risky project and one from which they tend to shy away. In effect, they have been relationally disabled or incapacitated by the gendered violence they have experienced; not just interpersonal violence at the hands of men, but also the symbolic and systemic violence attendant on their criminalisation *as women*. The experiences of the men in Ugelvik's (2022) study, by contrast, are very differently gendered. Buoyed by the development of trusting relationships with correctional staff, they are prepared and enabled to take these relational risks (for example in seeking, securing and sustaining employment). Indeed, in many cases, they enjoy the rewards of disclosing a criminalised past: crucially, a past that others are willing to consign *to the past*. In Fox's (2015) study, even those convicted of sexual offences – a highly stigmatised and excluded group – find inside the structures of CoSA a safe space to negotiate both relational connection and the identity change that it enables, even within a wider social climate of hostility and rejection.

In sum, while all of these studies attest to the importance of recognition, trust, acceptance and belonging within processes of desistance, taken together, they also reveal just how diverse desisting people's experiences may be. Their prospects are shaped not just by their own personal and

institutional histories but also by social structures and by cultural and community dynamics that play out very differently for different people in different contexts. It is also notable that many of the interventions and interactions discussed in these studies focus on the micro-level of recognition and trust from other individuals, with attempts to intervene on the meso- and macro-level less common.

Towards belonging: A role for corrections?

In the longer paper on which I have drawn here, Marguerite Schinkel and I also discuss findings from some of our own (separate) research studies, which tend to demonstrate just how severe the obstacles to belonging in mainstream society may be for people who have been repeatedly criminalised (McNeill & Schinkel, 2024). Comparing these findings with studies of people migrating and seeking asylum, we explore how difficult securing belonging can be when the foundational resources on which it depends (i.e., civil rights, personal security and safety, linguistic and cultural competence, social capital and connections) are unevenly available (cf. Bhatia & Canning, 2020).

As Davis, et al., (2018) note, people in such circumstances face 'contested belonging': '[b]elonging becomes a kind of Goffmanian stage where identities are performed and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion are enacted' (p1-2). Such scholars thus draw attention to very complex dynamics of belonging. They note that it is both *multi-scalar* (meaning that contradictory positionings -- as included or excluded -- can co-exist in the same environment) and *multi-locational* (meaning that a person can identify with many different communities and identities at the same time). They explore 'emplacement practices' that evolve in pursuit of belonging; these are, in an important sense, 'practices of home-making' (Blunt & Dowling, 2006: 196), and they depend not just on the efforts of those trying to make a home, but also on the hospitable or hostile reactions of those around them (cf. Urie, et al., 2019).

What does this all mean for corrections? Perhaps the single most important insight that emerges from work on tertiary desistance is that seeking to 'correct' or rehabilitate the individual in prison or on supervision will not be enough to secure the kinds of integration on which longer-term desistance depends. Even if we choose to neglect human rights or justice-based arguments about the importance of seeking such integration, the desistance literature suggests we may struggle to reduce reoffending if we neglect it.

It follows then that correctional services might need to think not just about how they assist desistance in micro-level interactions between their staff and those in their care, but also about how to enable desistance-supporting meso-level interactions with families and communities. Even then, there is no escaping the power of social structures to constrain or enable desistance – and that suggests that the leaders of correctional services need to advocate (with others) for collaborations across government department portfolios and with civil society partners to influence and affect the social contexts where people find – or fail to find – acceptance and belonging.

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About the Authors

Fergus McNeill is Professor of Criminology and Social Work at the University of Glasgow. Prior to becoming an academic in 1998, Fergus worked for a decade in residential drug rehabilitation and as a criminal justice social worker.
His research projects and publications have focused mainly on institutions, cultures and practices of punishment, rehabilitation and reintegration. As well exploring how increasingly knowledge about desistance from crime might re-shape rehabilitation and reintegration (both within and beyond criminal justice), Fergus's work has increasingly used creative and ethnographic methods to better understand how criminal justice is experienced, both by those subject to it and by those whose job is to try to realise it in practice. From January 2026-December 2030, he will lead a major 5-year study, funded by the European Research Council's Advanced Grants scheme, of 'Rehabilitation and Reintegration in Europe' (RaRiE), working with colleagues in the Universities of Leiden (Miranda Boone and Hilde Wermink) and Oslo (Thomas Ugelvik). Fergus's 2018 book, 'Pervasive Punishment: Making sense of mass supervision', was the winner of the European Society of Criminology's book prize. His next book, co-edited with Mary Corcoran and Beth Weaver), 'Generative Justice: Beyond crime and punishment', is due for publication by Bristol University Press in January 2026.

Marguerite is a senior lecturer in Criminology and a member of the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research. She joined the University of Glasgow in October 2013 as an ESRC Future Leader Research Fellow. In the past, her research has focused on the meaning of long-term (PhD) and repeated short-term prison sentences (post-doc) for those who undergo them. She found that long sentences

have to be accepted in order to cope with them, and are sometimes given transformative meanings in order to explain a positive future. Persistent short sentences, on the other hand, are not individually meaningful, but people serving them come to feel they belong in prison and that they have wasted their lives. Marguerite has also studied the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on punishment in Scotland, as co-stream lead on criminal justice, part of a wider research project at the University of Glasgow. Her monograph '*Being Imprisoned*', based on her PhD, was published in 2014. More recently, Marguerite has worked with an artist and Modern Studies teachers to develop a graphic novel and learning resource based on her research: A Life In Pieces - SCCJR.

Before starting her PhD, Marguerite worked as a support assistant in L'Arche Vancouver, as a mental health support worker in Edinburgh, and as a researcher, including for the Criminal Justice Social Work Development Centre for Scotland.