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# Starting to stop: Young offenders' desistance from crime

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## Abstract

This paper explores the complexities of the interplay between structural and agentic changes in 21 young offender's lives as they start to stop offending. The young people's ability to desist from crime was dependent upon their engagement with a 'hook for change', their development of prosocial relationships and 'knifing off' of elements of their offending past, the extent of their identity change, and their confidence about desistance. Desistance was less likely in the absence of a 'hook' and where offenders were running a 'condemnation script'. The study challenges previous research that argues that desistance from crime in adolescence is unlikely.

## Keywords

Desistance, youth offending, youth crime, youth justice, structure/ agency, 'hooks for change'

## Introduction

It is generally accepted that offending behaviour, if it begins, increases during early adolescence, peaks during late-adolescence, and then declines steadily from early-adulthood (Nagin et al., 1995). However, until recently, relatively little research has explored *why and how* people stop offending when they do. Indeed, the focus in the literature to date has been around the 'causal' factors that underpin offending behaviour rather than the factors associated with ceasing offending. The recent emergence of 'desistance' (commonly understood as the cessation of criminal activity) as a key research concern has begun to address this gap, though studies have largely been focused on adult rather than young offenders. This paper aims to explore the desistance of a group of young offenders when they are in adolescence or entering young-adulthood.

## Desistance in previous research

Much criminological literature argues that young people offend because of their age and immaturity, a choice to offend for monetary or hedonistic reasons or in the pursuit of excitement, an inability to attain desired goals through conventional means, a lack of self-control (linked to immaturity), and/ or poor socialisation in childhood. In short, there is little agreement on the factors or correlates that bring about offending behaviours in young people. Theories on desistance are similarly disparate. Early research argued that offenders may desist when the factors that bring about offending no longer exist, or are no longer dominant, in their lives; however, there is limited research evidence now that this is the case (Barry, 2006), and desistance as a process or event needs to be conceptualised in different ways.

Desistance emerged as an area of interest following the somewhat unexpected findings from a number of longitudinal studies in the UK and North America that began in the late-1950s (Farrington, 2002; Farrington, 2005; Kempf-Leonard, 1990; Wolfgang et al., 1987). This research had aimed to study crime over the life course but found instead that many participants in their cohorts stopped offending as they entered adulthood. The pattern of

offending in these studies reflects the now well-established 'age-crime curve', which argues that offending begins in early- to-mid-adolescence, peaks at around age 18, and then drops off until it stops for most at around age 25 (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1983) but led to questions of how stopping offending might be explained. This early research concluded that while the pattern of offending identified at the macro (aggregate) level by the age-crime curve was important, it concealed disparities in changes in offending at the micro (individual) level.

In developing these early findings from desistance research, numerous studies have identified factors associated with successful desistance, including: marriage/ family formation (Osgood and Lee, 1993; Shover, 1983); employment (Fletcher, 2001; Uggen, 1999); detachment from delinquent peer groups (Maruna and Roy, 2007; Warr, 2002); the positive impact of criminal justice interventions (Burnett, 1992; Rex, 1999); motivation and confidence ('hope') in the ability to desist (Burnett, 1992; Farrall, 2002); the development of a prosocial sense of morality (Weaver, 2009); and the development of an alternative, non-criminal identity (Giordano et al., 2002). However, research is still needed on how desistance is understood and experienced from the perspective of the individual offender. The rationale for such research is that it will offer a greater insight into *how* and *why* successful desistance occurs for some offenders but not for others (Maruna, 2000b) and how the different factors involved in desistance operate and interact in individuals' lives. The aim of such research, and the current study, is to further develop a theoretical understanding of socio-psychological explanations for desistance from crime.

### **Understanding structure and the agent in desistance**

There are three broad theoretical explanations for desistance, which informed the current study: 'agency' theories, 'structural' theories and 'integrated' theories (Barry, 2010; LeBel et al., 2008). These perspectives are varyingly concerned with the extent to which changes in normative social structures (e.g. employment, family) affect individuals' lives and the capacity of the individual (the agent) to act autonomously or according to his/ her own free will within those structures.

Early agency theories explained desistance in relation to an offender's free will or rational choice (Clarke and Cornish, 1985) and his/ her motivations, values and beliefs. Offenders will desist, or at least try to, when they come to believe that offending is morally wrong and that the rewards from crime are outweighed by the risks (Shover, 1983). On the other hand, structural theories explain desistance as resulting from particular life-course events, or turning points (Laub and Sampson, 1993), such as gaining employment, getting married, or starting a family. These events alter the socio-structural context of an individual's life, whereby offending becomes incompatible with the new roles that the individual finds him/ herself occupying, or where the structural context creates a new set of routine activities that restrains offending behaviour (Farrall, 2002; Laub and Sampson, 2001).

Recent research on the role of the individual in the desistance process considers his/ her reaction to and interaction with socio-structural change and focuses on the ways in which offenders negotiate changing social circumstances in their lives and how this can lead to different desistance outcomes. In their review of the existing desistance literature, LeBel et al. (2008) argue that there are four interweaving issues that are related to the role of the individual agent in the desistance process: 1. hope and self-efficacy (Burnett and Maruna,

2004; Maruna, 2001); 2. shame and remorse (Leibrich, 1996); 3. internalising stigma (Ahmed et al., 2001); and 4. developing alternative identities (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001). LeBel et al. draw particularly on Giordano et al.'s (2002: 1001) work which suggests that an 'exposure to a 'hook for change' [e.g. employment opportunity] and **one's attitude toward it** are the important elements of successful change' (emphasis added). Giordano et al. argue, therefore, that 'agentic moves' (2002: 992) are the most important aspect of the desistance process, and that an offender's commitment to change, *openness to change*, and ability to identify and engage with hooks for change are the factors which are most likely to facilitate desistance. Similarly, Maruna and Roy (2007) suggest that desistance is more likely to result from changes in offenders' 'self-identity and worldview' (2007: 115), such as their commitments, concerns and needs, while changes in social and environmental factors are likely to be interpreted differently depending upon these changing worldviews. Giordano et al. conclude that 'in addition to externally manipulated shifts [...] we must consider that changes may primarily involve the hook's perceived availability to help an individual, and its meaning, salience, or importance for the individual' (2002: 1051).

Structural 'turning points' were central to the desistance of the cohort in Sampson and Laub's study because they offered key sources of informal social control and purposeful routine activities (Sampson and Laub, 1993). Or, as Giddens (1979: 124) argues, turning points are 'critical situations' and 'a set of circumstances which – for whatever reason – radically disrupt accustomed routines of daily lives'. While Giddens' argument is much more aligned with the notion of the inhibiting effect of positive routine activities (Farrall, 2002), Maruna cautions that the importance of turning points is potentially overrated and that there is 'nothing inherent in a situation which makes it a turning point. One person's reason for changing [his/her] life... might be another person's reason to escalate offending'. Rather, they 'serve an important symbolic and psychological function [for offenders]' (2001: 25). As such, according to Maruna (2001) and Giordano et al. (2002), the transformative potential of a turning point is embedded in the symbolic weight each offender places on it rather than any inherent quality of the event itself.

Recent research on desistance has therefore moved towards theories which explain desistance in terms of an interaction between individual and socio-structural factors (integrated theories), whereby desistance occurs when an offender's attitudes, values and decision-making change alongside a socio-structural context that is also changing. According to integrated theories (also known as the 'structure-agency debate', Barry, 2010; Bottoms et al., 2004; Farrall and Bowling, 1999; LeBel et al., 2008), one cannot happen without the other and changes in both agentic and social domains are crucial for desistance. The sequencing of these changes is not clear (see LeBel et al., 2008, for a discussion of the 'chicken and egg' of the process of desistance) but what is known is that the relationship between different types of change is complex. On the one hand, the motivated offender seeks to alter his/ her socio-structural context by searching for, or manufacturing, particular prosocial life-course transitions; once these transitions take place, new behaviours are learned and new prosocial roles become galvanised (Barry, 2010). On the other, prosocial life-course changes can encourage the unmotivated individual to make the necessary agentic changes for desistance.

### **The current study**

In all, despite the growing body of research that employs an integrated approach, the structure-agency debate in desistance that is concerned with the interplay between structural (e.g. family) and agentic (e.g. motivation) factors, remains under-explored in previous research. 'Despite a growing theoretical literature, little is known about how people use agency in their interactions with the social world to achieve valued goals' (Healy, 2014: 873). An integrated theory of desistance which explores these structural and agentic factors in desistance is relevant to the current research as it allows for an investigation of structural factors in relation to life-course turning points and 'hooks for change' in an offender's social context, and agentic factors in respect of an offender's attitudes, values, motivations, hope and decision-making that influence behavioural intentions (Farrall and Bowling, 1999).

Importantly, the current work focuses on young offenders who have been largely neglected in previous desistance research. Indeed, most of the research explored so far in this paper was carried out with adult offenders. Furthermore, the focus of the current research was on the young people's own stories of, and perspectives on, crime and desistance as they 'start to stop'.

The current study centered young offenders' voices based on the idea that 'it is necessary to examine the experiences of young people [and] within which context they negotiate their identities and pathways through life' (Armstrong, 2004: 111). It collected data with 21 'persistent and serious' young offenders from three Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) in England (six or seven young people in each), which included rural and urban settings. In the current study, persistent young offenders were defined as those young people whose offending merited the courts imposing a community sentence with an intensive intervention (the then Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme (ISSP)). All of the young people had a large number of previous convictions and at least one conviction for a serious offence. They were male and were aged between 13 and 17 at the time of data collection; seven were from BME groups and the remainder was white.

The young people were sampled purposefully according to two main criteria: that they were recently sentenced (and therefore trying, perhaps again, to desist); and that they were serving an ISSP (and, therefore, defined as a persistent and serious offender). The YOTs involved in the study had been involved in a previous evaluation project co-led by the first author of the current paper and the young people were selected by collaborating with the ISSP manager in each YOT who had oversight of all of the young people's supervisions. All of the young people who were asked to participate in the research agreed to do so. The data collected included initial individual interviews (which lasted between 25 minutes and two hours and were conducted in YOT offices), weekly 'phone-logs' to track young people over time (which lasted 10-15 minutes), where possible, and 'exit' interviews with each young person (which lasted approximately 30 minutes), where possible. In all, the core data included 21 initial interviews; 51 phone-logs; and seven exit interviews. The study also interviewed one nominated 'significant other' for each young person (n=15), who was a parent or other carer in all cases, and one ISSP manager in each YOT.

The study followed the young offenders for up to six months through the phone logs, frequent contact with ISSP managers and, if necessary, contact with the nominated other. Initially, the

methodology included weekly phone-logs with the young people in order to track their progress. During the course of the study, however, some of the young people declined to take part in the phone-logs or exit interviews, and of those who did, there was some interruption to or attrition from the data collection where the participants lost or replaced their mobile phones, were unavailable for phone-logs, or were taken into custody. As a result, the phone-logs often took place fortnightly, or after three weeks, when it was convenient for young people and they were available.

The data formed a case study methodology appropriate for the explanatory (how and why) nature of the study (Yin, 2003) and a theoretically-informed exploration of the data (Mason, 2002). A thematic analysis allowed for such an exploration and the 'segmentation, categorisation, and relinking of aspects of data' (Grbich, 2007: 16). 'Staying with the data', and utilising theory, was crucial to the work as the focus of the study was on the young offenders' understandings of their lives and experiences, the meanings that they attributed to change, and our theoretical understandings of desistance.

### **Young offenders and desistance**

For the data analysis, the 21 young people were divided into two groups: those who desisted from crime for the six-month period of the study (the 'desisters', n=6) and those who did not (the 'persisters', n=15). Previous research has noted that measuring desistance from crime is difficult (for example, Brame et al., 2003; Burnett and Maruna, 2004; Kazemian, 2007; Laub and Sampson, 2001; Maruna, 2000a; Maruna et al., 2002; McNeill, 2004; McNeill, 2006). This is not least because it is arguable that the only way to be sure that an individual has stopped offending is when s/he has died (Farrington, 1997). The current study did not include a reconviction study or any measure of reoffending beyond the young people's self-reports. This was intentional as the focus of the study was on young people's accounts of their own experiences and motivations. 'Measurements' of desistance were therefore based on self-reported behaviours. It is recognised, however, that self-reports are potentially limited in terms of young people presenting desirable responses. As such, data on reoffending was coupled with information from ISSP managers and nominated others. In all, desistance in the current study was conceptualised, as it has been in previous research, as a period of time during which an individual maintains a non-offending lifestyle (Maruna, 2001) as part of the process of desistance when young offenders are 'starting to stop' offending.

The desisters' data reveal a number of themes. First, they were regretful of their offending behaviour, which they linked to immaturity and a lack of understanding of the consequences of offending. Second, they were all aware of the importance of their own efforts in desistance. Third, they were experiencing renewed and increasing involvement with prosocial others and institutions ('hooks for change'). Fourth, they were trying to shed their old, 'offending identities' and develop new prosocial, non-criminal identities. In all of these themes from the data, the interplay between the desisters' structural and agentic changes was crucial, and this is the argument that we wish to develop in this paper.

In discussing one of his serious offences, one desister said: *'I regret doing it now. The police told me that he came in crying his eyes out and stuff and that made me feel terrible'* (Rob, 17, desister). This sense of regret was apparent in all of the desisters' data. In addition, the

desisters' regrets about their previous behaviours and experiences brought about conscious efforts to change their behaviours:

In a way going [into prison] was the best thing that could have happened 'cause I've learned and I've had time to think about what I'm doing and that. [I] just got to [...] do what I gotta do. Keep out of trouble. (Damon, 16, desister)

These data suggest that the desisters were cognisant of their own agency (and the importance of their own efforts) in desistance. Some of the desisters stated this explicitly: *'Stopping offending is other people helping me but down to myself'* (Damon, 16, desister); and *'Using my own determination. It has to be my self-determination.'* (Dean, 17, desister)

Importantly, the desisters all referred to the role of other, prosocial people (e.g. family) and institutions (e.g. training or employment) in their desistance. They all also knew that they had to avoid criminal friends. One young person said: *'The friends that I hang around with now, they're all good. They all work and everything'* (Tyrone, 17, desister). And another said: *'[I] just got to keep away from certain people. [...] Get a job. Help my mum.'* (Damon, 16, desister).

Indeed, the desisters often referred to improving relationships with family in their data. For example:

It [family] cuts out like most families but it's perfect now. Now that I'm staying out of trouble and we can all speak. If I was still getting into trouble, I dunno, it was different. When I was getting into trouble, I used to see people in the room and they used to think I was going to nick something off them. But now that I don't get into trouble, they don't think that anymore. (Rob, 17, desister)

In addition, the desisters referred to the importance of some sort of training or employment in their desistance:

My [training course] will keep me out of trouble. I don't know. I'll just change. I won't be so lazy. It'll just keep me out of trouble. [...] And with a job, you don't need to get in trouble. You just work and get paid for it. (Damon, 16, desister)

I've just been in [on the weekends]. I've not been in trouble. I'm not going to get back into it. Not now I've got work. Like all I want to do is sleep outside of work. (Rob, 17, desister)

Finally, in terms of data from the desisters, the young people explicitly discussed shedding 'offending identities' and developing new, prosocial non-criminal identities. The account below from 'Rob' particularly captures this theme.

Now it's [offending] stuck with you. It comes everywhere with you. It follows you. People say it goes away but I don't think it does - it follows you the rest of your life. If you get into trouble, it's not a life at all, it's horrible. It's not a life just going to into prison all the time. I went to crown court. It's one of

them things that stops you and wakes you up. [...] Like, I come home from work now and I sit down with my mum and it feels like you're living a life. Rather than being a little dole-pusher and sitting around the house. Like more responsible in a way. Like more mature and stuff like that. [I want to] fetch myself a nice house and have kids and stuff like that. And make sure that they don't get in trouble. I don't want to go on living this life or for my kids to have this life. (Rob, 17, desister)

It is worth now considering the data from the persisters in the sample as these data offer some key similarities and contrasts to the desisters' data. The persisters were also regretful about their offending: *'I didn't know what the consequences were. We just thought we were having a laugh, me and my mates'* (Jared, 17, persister). They indicated that they wanted to stop offending and they were clear about their own role in stopping: *'It's gotta be my hard work. Because if you want what you want, you can only get it yourself, can't you?'* (Jared, 17, persister). They were also aware of the need to break off with offending others and indicated that they had been trying to do so: *'I don't have many friends now. Not really. Most of them get in trouble anyway. So I don't hang around with them'* (Jason, 16, persister); *'I don't have friends now - I've got different ones now. The friends I used to have were idiots. Pure idiots'* (Sam, 17, persister)

Crucially, however, the motivation and ability of the young people to desist was largely embedded in the other prosocial institutions with which they interacted; that is, family, education, training, and employers. It is on this issue that the persisters and desisters began to differ in their accounts. The desisters in the sample were all involved in some form of education, training and employment (a 'hook for change') and had at the same time started to repair family relationships. The data from the persisters' case studies, however, reported that their family relationships continued to be fraught: *'We argue a lot. About coming in late, smoking cannabis. Girls and shit like that.'* (Alex, 16, persister)

Yeah, we got into a bit of an argument today and I told him that I think he's going back to his own ways. I told him that I couldn't go through that again. When he went into prison, I had really high blood pressure anyway, basically brought on by him. When he was inside I was fine and my blood pressure went back to normal but now I find myself shaking. Every time I argue with him, I just start shaking. (Jared's mother)

The persisters were not involved in education, training or employment, and noted themselves that this was detrimental to their desistance:

I really want to get a job and it's doing my head in. I ain't got anything to do through the day and I'm just hanging around really. And if you ain't at school either, you won't have nothing to do. So you're obviously going to be out doing something and you're going to get in trouble somewhere down the line. (Jason, 16, persister)

Like when [I'm not] in school and bored and chilling with people who were getting in trouble. (Justin, 15, persister)



Indeed, those who were not involved in any of sort of education, training and employment and who were persisting with offending speculated about the potential benefits of a job.

Getting a job [would help] I suppose. Getting a job and having money and keeping off the streets. Because if I'm off the streets and busy, I can't get into as much trouble can I? (Todd, 17, persister)

The persisters also cited a desire for some sort 'normal life', which they believed could be achieved through education, training and employment. For example, *'Just to have a job and be like any other person really'* (Jared, 17, persister); *'To be self-employed. Nice house, kids, everything that's happened since year 11 to now just being put behind me. Just to have a clean slate'* (Sam, 17, persister).

Finally, in other key accounts, some of the persisters also reported that they were not confident of their ability to stop offending:

I wish I hadn't got into trouble now because I don't want to be like my mates going into prison all the time. And I don't want to turn out the same as my parents getting into trouble all the time. [...] My best mate is younger than me and he's been in prison eight times already. I don't want that to happen to me – that I just go in and out so much that I don't care anymore. But you never know what's going to happen do you, and sometimes something goes off and there it is again. I have something in me and I know I do and I know it'll be in me forever. (Todd, 17, persister)

Sometimes I just want to carry on getting into trouble. I know what's going to happen - I'll end up going back to [prison] for something stupid. Criminal damage or something like that. I just forget and I want to do something stupid. (Dylan, 16, persister)

You can't really [...] I'm not going to get a job cos I'm not going to get much money from it, yeah? I'm not going to 'offend' but I'm going to have to hustle to make ends meet. [...] I'll do what I have to do. (Asaf, 17, persister)

### **Agency, 'hooks for change' and the process of desistance**

The data point to important findings on the process of desistance. Most of the young people in the sample regretted their offending and linked it to their immaturity, and, importantly, wanted to desist from crime. The young people also emphasised the role of agency in their desistance and particularly how any change in their offending would be their own responsibility and effort. Furthermore, the young people stressed the importance of developing new, prosocial identities, moving away from negative influences, and developing positive relationships, in the process of desisting from crime. The likelihood of successful desistance was, however, mediated by the young people's access to opportunities to engage with, and take-up of, prosocial activities and interactions (and particularly education, training and employment) and the structures within which the young people lived. In short, these 'hooks for change' (Giordano et al., 2002) were crucial for the desisters as they moved through the process of desistance. As such, while the findings indicate that socio-structural

and agentic changes are intertwined in young people's lives and in their process of desistance, the data also suggest that positive structural changes play a particularly dominant role in young offenders' desistance. In addition, where such changes are absent, desistance is less likely.

The data from the desisters and persisters in the sample, in terms of wanting to stop offending, were similar across a number of dimensions. Both groups reported a desire to stop offending (Burnett, 2004a; Farrall, 2004), a regret of previous offending (Leibrich, 1996), trying to break away from offending others (Barry, 2006; Maruna, 2001; Warr, 2002), and a belief that one's own efforts are essential for desistance (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001). The marked difference between the groups, however, was in the young people's engagement with prosocial institutions, and particularly education, training and employment (Farrall, 2002; Laub and Sampson, 1993; Laub and Sampson, 2001), the development of prosocial relationships (Barry, 2006; Maruna, 2001; Warr, 2002); the extent to which they were starting to develop and embrace non-offender and prosocial identities (Maruna, 2001), and their confidence about their ability to desist and their chances of desistance (Burnett and Maruna, 2004; Burnett and McNeill, 2005; LeBel et al., 2008).

The desisters in the sample were confident about their chances of desistance and about the other non-offending aspects of their lives (for example, family, job and new friends). This was particularly evident in the accounts from the young people who had 'knifed off' (Elder, 2000) elements of their offending past in their efforts to 'make good' (Maruna, 2001). The desisting young people also discussed the importance of shedding the identity of 'offender' in the process of desistance and in developing new, prosocial and 'normal' identities. This further 'knifing off' of past behaviours and identities involved young people moving away from offending peer groups (Barry, 2006) and engaging with prosocial institutions, and particularly in education, training or employment. All of the desisters were engaged with a 'hook for change' that provided important functions for them. First, these activities were a source of informal social control (Farrall, 2002; Laub and Sampson, 2003; Sampson and Laub, 2005a) that they did not want to jeopardise by persisting with offending. Second, they provided young people with routine and purposeful activities that kept them busy and inhibited further offending (Barry, 2006; Farrall, 2002; Sampson and Laub, 2005a; Wikstrom and Butterworth, 2007). Third, the education, training and employment activity of the desisters was part of their future plans (LeBel et al., 2008). As Giordano et al. (2002: 1055, emphasis in original) state: 'hooks must contain a *projective* element directing the actor's attention towards present and *future* concerns'. 'Hooks', therefore, enable offenders to engage with projective 'prosocial normative repertoires'.

It is useful then to consider the structures of education, training and employment as a 'turning point' and 'hook' in the desisters' accounts of their trajectory to non-offending (Farrall, 2004; Sampson and Laub, 2003; Sampson and Laub, 2005b). While Maruna has questioned the potency of turning points, and the relevance of employment in particular to adolescents is perhaps unclear, Barry (2006) rightly argues that if an offender believes that s/he has made an active decision to desist because of a key turning point, it should not be discounted. In this way, turning points have the symbolic and psychological power that Maruna (2001) argues is key to their relevance. The desisters in the current sample made such links.

It is worth returning now to those young people in the sample who did not desist from crime for the period of the research. While they reported a number of issues in their lives, it was also notable that they were not engaged in any sort of education, training or employment. The absence of these potential turning points is important because the persisters did not experience the inhibiting effects of purposeful activities or social control available from education, training and employment, or the symbolic power of a turning point. In short, the persisters did not have a 'hook for change' that may bring about the *projective* element of desistance (Giordano et al., 2002). Further, and perhaps crucially, the persisters reported a 'condemnation script' which suggests that they had limited resistance to engaging in offending behaviour. Maruna's (2001) study also explored the accounts of both persisters and desisters, and found considerable differences in these subjective factors. The groups had similar backgrounds and lived in similar environments, yet the narrative 'scripts' they constructed were markedly different. Persistent or active offenders produced a fatalistic 'condemnation script' and reported their 'life scripts as having been written for them a long time ago' (2001: 75). They 'view themselves as victims of circumstance [and] claim to have a clear picture of the 'good life' but do not feel they have the ability to get there using their own volition' (2001: 83) or to 'to go legit or at least do something different with their lives' (2001: 74).

In Maruna's work, condemnation scripts were 'a self-narrative characterized by a lack of personal agency, a sense that they had nothing left to lose, and a focus on the pursuit of happiness through consumption and material gain' (2010: 575). These narratives, while perhaps less developed in the young people in the current study, were still evident in the persisters' accounts of the inevitability and even necessity of further offending. In contrast, the desisters in Maruna's study undertook self-reconstruction of the 'true self' in order to develop a non-offending identity (2004b: 89), and had to develop personal agency to achieve this and to overcome structural barriers to desistance (McNeill and Whyte, 2007: 55). In forging alternative identities and developing agency, desisters often identified some significant other, or outside force, that empowered the individual to accomplish 'what he or she was "always meant to do"' (Maruna, 2001: 87). These 'redemption scripts' were constructed by offenders as 'a story to redeem themselves of their past and [to] assert a meaningful future' (Maruna, 2010: 575). Similarly, these more 'hopeful' narratives were evident in the current desisters' data.

### *Structure vs. agency*

The current study indicated that the interplay between structural change, and the offender's own agency and sense of identity, are central to the process of desistance. However, the extent to which one precedes the other (LeBel et al's 'chicken and egg' question), or to which one is more important the other, also remains unclear. Certainly, the structural changes in the current desisters' lives brought about a set of prosocial circumstances which were largely absent from the persisters' lives. At the same time, however, the desisters reported an agentic change that was also part of their desistance (and was absent from the persisters' accounts). In these data, the structural and the agentic cannot easily be disentangled though it is arguable that without positive structural changes, the desisters would not have avoided offending. This raises the question of the role of agency in young offenders' desistance and suggests that while it is important, young offenders may not be as capable of exercising their

agency (as Healy, 2014: 873 says, 'using agency in interactions with the social world to achieve valued goals') as older offenders who are more mature and reflective. This certainly chimes with previous desistance research which argues that agentic change is less likely for younger offenders because of their stage of life (Farrall, 2004). Nonetheless, the current study argues that it cannot be discounted, and that agentic change, and desistance, are possible for young people. As Côté (1997) argues: 'young people who follow a developmental individualization, or agentic, pathway are more likely to achieve coherent adult identities than those who travel along a default individualization, or non-agentic, pathway' (Healy, 2014: 887).

### *Desisters vs. persisters*

Much of this paper has explored the start of desistance for a small group of young offenders who had stopped offending during the period of the study. However, it might be erroneous to assume that there are vast and enduring differences between these young people and those who persisted with offending. Healy (2014) argues that offenders and desisters are not discrete groups of people and that persisters are not necessarily lacking in the agency of desisters. Rather, it might be the case that persisters and desisters are on the same continuum of offending behaviour and are just being studied at different stages of the desistance process (Barry, 2007). What might be a key difference between these individuals, then, is not that persisters will continue to offend indefinitely and that desisters will have stopped forever but rather that the 'agentic potential [of the persisters] will not be activated unless the imagined self is perceived as both meaningful and credible' (Healy, 2014: 873). The persisters, rather than missing agency, may just not have found sufficient incentive to exercise their agency yet or may be running a condemnation script (Maruna, 2001). This understanding of agency as a 'dynamic interaction between the person and their social world' suggests that 'agentic action is supported by a range of cognitive, emotional and social resources that mature during the transition to adulthood' (Healy, 2014: 874). The constructing of a new identity that is key to the process of desistance is not just an internal or inner change but is influenced by broader social contexts which determine if new identities are available (Farrall et al., 2011) and depends upon the opportunities (and impediments) in the wider social environment (Deci and Ryan, 2012).

There is also some uncertainty about when, in the process of desistance or the continuum of offending, identity reconstruction takes place. Maruna et al (2004) argue, for example, that it takes places relatively late in the desistance process when an offender is entering into secondary desistance. King (2013) maintains, by contrast, that new identities begin to emerge early on in the desistance process. The need for Maruna's secondary (i.e. sustained) desistance is important here; nonetheless, early shifts in identity should not be discounted, particularly for young people, when identity formation is arguably in flux regardless of any involvement in offending.

Returning to the current sample, it is important to note that the persisters may just be some way behind the desisters on their continuum of offending or at a different, more unstable, stage of their desistance. What is key from the current research is that a certain confluence of structural and agentic conditions enabled desistance for some people during the period of the work, while its absence meant that desistance was less likely for others. As Healy (2014) argues, offenders must find ways to interact with the social world that realises their new, better, imagined and pro-social identities in the future. The current data indicate that

engaging in education, training and employment, and with pro-social others, realisation for desisters in ways that were not possible for persisters whose imagined, new identities were not yet available from their lived realities (Soyer, 2014).

In all, then, the current study indicates that the structural and the agentic are in constant interaction in young offenders' lives. For the desisters, 'hooks for change' and changing personal relationships, coupled with their motivation to cease offending, were crucial. For the persisters, the lack of a 'hook', ongoing fraught relationships, and a possible 'condemnation script' were central to their accounts and also to their persistence. This is not to say that the persisters will not manage to stop offending later on in their lives; rather, it is more likely the 'hook' that will be crucial for their desistance has not yet become available.

The current study addresses a research gap on young people's desistance from crime, and challenges previous research that argues that desistance is less likely in adolescence (Farrall, 2002). The findings have important theoretical and practical implications. Knowledge on desistance can be developed by exploring young people's accounts on their process of desistance and the ways in which structural changes in their lives bring about agentic growth, and vice versa, in this process. Such research must be mindful, undoubtedly, of the complexities of the interplay between structure and agency, in desistance terms, and of the varying stages of, and potential fluctuations in, desistance that young people experience.

Second, in terms of criminal justice practice, McNeill (2006) suggests that work with offenders should incorporate an understanding of the desistance process, in particular with respect to identifying the connections between structure, agency, reflexivity and identity. Both Farrall (2002) and McNeill (2006) argue that desistance-focused work exists to a degree, insofar as interventions do exist which help to bring about desistance, but most criminal justice practice is still not sufficiently cognisant of the important accounts of offenders themselves. Criminal justice practice with young people therefore needs to take greater account of the perspectives of young people on *their* desistance process, and to co-create tailored interventions with the young people themselves, rather than imposing punishments and interventions that discount the personal narratives and agentic power that young people can harness alongside turning points and 'hooks for change'. Accordingly, these accounts from the current study indicate the centrality of the complex interaction between the objective and subjective, and the importance of a 'hook for change' in the projective and potentially sustained element of young people's desistance journeys, especially when young offenders are considering alternatives to offending, or, in our words, *starting to stop*.

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