

# Key theories of desistance from crime criminology essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

When a criminal is able to stop the behavior that characterizes his or her criminal activities, the gradual process involved is what is termed as desistance. Apart from the fact that it has practical applications for probation workers with criminal offenders from the community, desistance also has a strong link and connection in the rehabilitation of a criminal. However, it is evident that theories of desistance when compared to the theories of the start of criminal behavior have not been fully researched on and expanded in the field of criminology (Smith, 2007). It is therefore a good sign when studies of desistance increase drastically especially since the last twenty years; this has been particularly noticeable after the formulation of the life course theory that was done by Sampson and Laub. But as Piquero (2004: 103) explains, continued research has been significantly affected by methodological and theoretical issues. Moreover, theorists in the field have not been able to come up with a universal definition of desistance. Consequently this paper endeavors to create a workable definition of desistance and to furthermore give a preview of the updated main facts and theories of desistance.

## **Understanding desistance**

Oxford Dictionary defines desistance as, “ to desist” or “ to stop doing something; cease or abstain”. Applying this definition to criminology is however a bit technical. The big question is usually about time, if a criminal is able to stop a certain criminal behavior for four weeks for example, is it correct to classify him or her as an accomplished case of desistance? What is the recommended time for one to be sure that he or she is free from the crime? Developing a clear definition of desistance therefore becomes quite

an issue especially since it is not well understood whether or not relapse and recidivism are crucial in the study of desistance. The option of observing a criminal's past behavior to best highlights his or her possible future behavior is also still not well structured (LeBel et al, 2004). Laub and Sampson (2001) as a matter of fact agree that a definition of desistance cannot be made, they support that the questions in a particular research best deduce the definition of desistance for the researcher (cited in Maruna, 2006). According to Shadd Maruna, for a habitual offender, any recognizable time spent without doing any crime is called primary desistance.

However studies on recidivism and relapse cannot be complete without an outline of achieving long term desistance. Maruna goes on to therefore state that secondary desistance is when a criminal is able to change his identity and take an almost permanent direction to a life free of the initial crime that was a norm in his behavior. Studying secondary desistance is important as it seeks to understand how initial offenders can be able to keep a distance from their crimes. Desistance is therefore not the final result of the end of a crime; it is actually the process that is gradual and continuous till the end result of successful desistance. Sampson and Laub (2001) acknowledge that there is a huge difference between the stopping an offence and the continuous change to a crime free lifestyle. They mark that as compared to theories of offending, desistance theories have not yet been fully studied and explained, however desistance is now understood as the procedure necessary for acquiring an accomplished state of non-offence.

It is important that a criminal who wants to change must be willing to change his or her self identity and concept to be able to grasp the full context of <https://assignbuster.com/key-theories-of-desistance-from-crime-criminology-essay/>

change. Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) explain that on the contrary it is a common occurrence to find ex-offenders who have undergone desistance commit other acts of deviance, (cited in Sampson and Laub, 2003: 298). Desistance is therefore basically the ability of a former criminal to be able to completely withdraw from a crime and to maintain being in that state regardless of the challenges involved when trying to keep away. Some of these challenges are drug abuse and addiction, unemployment, few academic opportunities, social pressure and return to environments with high crime rates (Richards and Jones, 2004).

Career criminals are those who have been criminal offenders for a considerably long period of time (Maruna, 2001). According to Laub and Sampson (2003), career criminals rather than small time offenders should be given more attention in researches on desistance. However another major problem in the study of desistance is the availability of completely successful offenders in desistance to the researchers in the field (Maruna, 2001; Burnett, 2004). Total desistance to many ex-offenders is quite a hard step as most of them usually end up going back to their initial criminal tendencies (Piquero, 2004).

Addiction is a very significant factor that is more often overlooked yet its contribution to the whole process of desistance has a major impact on the ability of a criminal to completely change. It is therefore important to understand the connection between the two before arriving at a definition of desistance. From a number of researches it has been recognized that the link between addiction and criminal activities is actually very strong. A drug addict is therefore more likely to engage in crimes (Maruna, 2001). Moreover <https://assignbuster.com/key-theories-of-desistance-from-crime-criminology-essay/>

the cause of addiction and criminality are as a matter of fact very similar.

Frisher and Beckett (2006: 141) found that a large percentage of drug abusers are very active members in criminal gangs.

Therefore, when defining desistance, it is necessary to note that the complete resistance of both criminal offending and drug abuse must be realized (Maruna, 2001). To achieve the purpose of this paper desistance can be described and defined as the initial process allowing quality desistance from drug abuse, criminality and other forms of deviance for an ex- criminal. Quality desistance in this case is the is the total termination of previous criminal behaviors together with other possible forms of deviance like drug abuse for at least ten years accompanied by a change in the identity of an individual.

## **Desistance theories**

### **Ageing**

Age has been found to be a significant factor in criminology, as one grows older it is noted that their level of criminality greatly reduces. (Smith, 2007; Sampson and Laub, 2003; Gluecks, 1943; cited in Sampson and Laub, 2003; Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; cited in Sampson and Laub, 2003). In 2000 in the United Kingdom 19 year olds were found to have committed crimes fifty times more those which men of over fifty years had committed. According to research the total lifespan of a criminal is usually general considering factors like early deaths, imprisonment and when a criminal is evolving to avoid being detected (Maruna, 2006).

In a research of 411 criminal males in London, Farrington (1990) realized that as the criminals grew older, their crimes reduced greatly with time but this however depended on different types of crimes (cited in Smith, 2007). For example, burglary is at its highest at age 20 while fraud and drug abuse offences record their highest at the age of 25 all the way to 30 as burglary sets on a steady decline afterwards. Nevertheless for the persistent hardcore criminals into their 70s, there was a clear connection between their age and their crime rates according to studies by Laub and Sampson (2003, 2005, 2005b). Furthermore they realized that alcohol and drug offences were their highest in the mid- thirties as compared to other offences. They finally came to a conclusion that both age and the type of crimes affect the whole process of desistance as well. However there have been different explanations to the not clear age crime curve. Developmental criminologists have been able to link the age of an offender and the capability of total desistance to childhood related issues. (Mulver et al, 1988; cited in Sampson and Laub, 2003; Nagin, 2005; cited in Sampson and Laub, 2005a) Offenders are therefore divided into two distinct groups, the adolescent and the persistent adult offenders.

As a result it will be evident that in their late teens the adolescents will be able to grown out of crime and will be able to work on their social circles basically due to their education and good social integration skills. The adult offender however will find it very hard to terminate deviancy due to unsuccessful relationships, academic prospects and also due to their low cognitive capabilities (Moffitt, 1993; 1994; cited in Sampson and Laub, 2003). As a result of this theory, criminals are therefore grouped into two separate groups that are very different from each other due to childhood

causes. And for any chance of desistance then one has to be in the right group. Sampson and Laub (2003; 2005a; 2005b) on the other hand are against that approach and explain that anyone can be successful in desistance irrespective of which group they fall in (2003: 179). According to them childhood factors of offence do not determine desistance but instead help to explain the whole process of desistance.

Gottfredson and Hirschi have their views as well and point out that with the gradual process of growing old offenders usually find themselves stopping deviance (1995; cited in Sampson and Laub, 2003). They expound that for any organism there is always a stage of discontinuity that applies to criminology and the study of desistance and its links with age. Consequently, desistance becomes an expected phenomenon in the normal life of a criminal. Maruna (2001) however does not fully agree with this because according to him desistance, especially at the beginning, takes a huge amount of emotional, psychological and even physical effort and resources. Gluecks (1943) agrees with this too because he highlighted that desistance is from a change that comes with maturity, meaning, an offender gradually stops committing a crime (cited in Sampson and Laub, 2003). This process is more often evidenced after the age 25 when a criminal starts tiring and gets less involved with crime. This theory however is not left out on the criticisms since it is claimed that it does not fully address the issue of age and its role in desistance (Maruna, 2001; Sampson and Laub, 2003). Acknowledging that age is a significant factor in desistance, Sampson and Laub (1992) further argue that the importance of turning points in life and social contacts is underestimated in the maturational reform (cited in Maruna, 2001).

## Life Course Theory

A significant study on 500 men up to the age of 32 was carried in the 1930s and 1940s by the Gluecks (1943; cited in Sampson and Laub, 2003; 2005a; 2005b). Sampson and Laub later on in an impressive research followed up on 52 of these men and investigated on their criminal career to the age of 70. They found out that the causes of desistance and persistence are actually opposites, namely, deliberately productive agency, establishment of limits in social relationships and organized routine activities (Sampson and Laub, 2003; 2005a; 2005b; 2006). Their finding indicated that job stability, military service and marriage were able to positively contribute to achieving desistance. These turning points were realized in the process of desistance whereby an offender seeks to start a new life by changing location or even starting a new job like entering the military for example. This however does not necessarily involve starting over, sometimes these offenders work to gain back and maintain their original contacts like a job or a marriage in their quest to stop their criminal tendencies. Whichever path desistance takes these turning points often lead to:

an elimination of the past

chance for the growth and development of new social contacts that have a positive effect on an individual

types of direct and indirect evaluation and observance of character

planned routines with a central concern to family rather than peers



circumstances allowing for change in identity and development of new scripts of a new self

These factors, they explain are true and are not affected by the type of marriage and the crime life of an individual, though informal, parenthood and cohabiting have also been linked to successful desistance (Sampson and Laub, 2006; Katz, 1999). Individuals with none of these social bonds are also more able to stop offending because; in the end they do not lose anything. Rebecca Katz (1999: 13) indicates that, families may play a significant role in developing desistance since family influences self control and delinquency. Life course theory emphasizes on the strong influence of the social environment to offending explaining that absence of criminal peers reduces the chances of an individual ever engaging in offences and in the end positive attitudes favoring change will grow (Warr, 1998; cited in Sampson and Laub, 2003). Life Course Theory contradicts the link between developmental theories in criminal careers and desistance. It agrees that adulthood experiences are essential as well but to some point more significant in establishing the possible trajectory of desistance (2003).

Circumstances, structural set-ups and personal choices all work together to promote desistance. The theme that desistance is a systematic process that continuously gets renewed, underestimates the importance of research on personal encouragement and the influence of social environment (Sampson and Laub, 2003: 171)

## **Agency**

Yet another essential element that has been pointed out as key in achieving successful desistance is agency. (Burnett, 2004; Maruna, 2001; McNeill, 2006; Maguire et al, 2006; Maruna, 2001; Sampson and Laub, 2005 a). The theory of rational offence understands the fact that a criminal is able to make decisions based on his judgment of what is good or bad according to him in his crime life. Agency therefore works hand in hand with rational choice in the key decision making processes of a criminal. Agency is important since it assists in the overall process of making a rational choice. Furthermore, when the inconsistent prototypes of criminal activities are considered together with financial and familial challenges most criminal encounter the theory of rational choice cannot by its own back up volitions to desist (Burnett, 2004; Sampson and Laub, 2005b). In their study of the Gluecks' men Sampson and Laub (2005a) discovered that agency was a necessary component in the process of desistance. There is more to the structural support in the process of desistance, agency is required to offer the determination and persistence part of the equation. Agency determines the will to keep moving on and only those who are persistent will be able to manage the whole process. Measuring the determination and charge to persist the whole process of desistance is quite a challenge and as a result creates yet another crucial factor in the concept of turning points (Maruna, 2001) (Sampson and Laub, 2005a: 177). Moreover it is a quintessential component in the study of desistance and persistence in a criminal career that has however not been fully researched to date. In their research of the life course theory Sampson and Laub assert that they have been seeking to

explain the importance of the human agency as an aid in understanding desistance and other deviance forms (2003: 177).

“Knifing off one’s past, has come out to be a vital element to describe the ability to be able to accomplish a successful desistance for some individuals. To achieve this voluntarily, agency is necessary since it is one of the most difficult things to do and needs a lot of determination. It is a process that is more often accompanied by cutting all past contacts and establishing new ones for example geographical location and family. Most importantly though, Maruna et al (2006a) explained that it can as well involve change from the inside, or a change in the way the offender thinks about him or herself, their past, and their environment. It is this positive change that motivates an offender to persist on and maintain desistance for longer (Maruna, 2001; Sampson and Laub, 2003; 2005a; Maguire et al, 2006).

Contemplation time was found to be a crucial moment that assisted in creating a turning point to desistance according to a study by Margaret Hughes (1998). And it was found that the opportunity to contemplate came as a result of a change in geographical location, imprisonment and residential treatment programmes. Hughes participants found their desire to change develop when they removed from the usual environments and being able to get ample time for self actualization.

## **Social identity**

Researchers have tried to explain the phenomenon whereby some individual are able to sustain long term resistance while others do not, and it has been

discovered that apart from agency, an individual's self identity change is similarly necessary. When an offender creates a a different set of beliefs and perspective chances of maintaining desistance are normally guaranteed to some point (Burnett, 2004). That is why programs like the cognitive behavioral therapy and the 12 step that work to develop a change in personal identity are advocated for during incarceration (Maruna, 2001).

Each and every individual, whether an ex-offender, offender or normal citizen has a unique self identity through which their actions are guided upon, it is therefore as a result of this mechanisms that give people the different circumstances they exist in. The significance of change in a criminal life is often subjectified by self-narratives (McNiell, 2006). More often though not a fact; self narratives have been of assistance when people seek to explain their actions. Narratives very often change throughout the life course and understanding narratives, helps individuals realize the significance of past and present events in our lives (Sampson and Laub, 2005a).

In a desistance study in Liverpool, Shadd Maruna investigated the different self narratives of two distinct groups of offenders whereby one persisted and the other desisted, to account for the changes in ex-offender identities (Maruna, 2001). He was able to find out that both the desisting and persistent criminals actually had more or less the same personality characteristics and were not as agreeable and conscious as the general population. Self-narratives are the only components that divided the two groups after thorough interviews. Active offenders had what Maruna called a, "condemnation script" (2001), meaning, they saw life as an unfortunate abyss of hostility and uncertainty. They believed that circumstances had

<https://assignbuster.com/key-theories-of-desistance-from-crime-criminology-essay/>

pushed them to their present situation and there was nothing they could do to change things and that the authority pushed them even further away. Desisting ex-offenders on the other hand had a positive outlook on their past and present and this is what assisted them to continue with their desistance process. It is this self-narrative that may be the tool needed for successful desistance.

The past and present life of an ex-offender is often different and this is almost basically due to the self narrative (Maruna et al, 2007). This self narrative attaches a psychological component to the real facts of the past and creates a purpose and meaning in the life of an offender. This is what brings about the positive outlook and assists in achieving desistance. In a study focused completely on religious changes of rehabilitated offenders, Maruna et al discovered that their self-narrative was interestingly altered after changing their religious beliefs (Maruna et al, 2006b). As a result the importance of this self narrative is once more highlighted as it helps an offender realize that the past can be changed and that the future has a hope even for those in long sentences. The offender is therefore able to have a new sense of identity, empowerment, purpose and forgiveness.

The self narratives of most offenders in the desisting group have a common characteristic Maruna describes as, " the redemption script" (2001). This is basically the belief that an offender is a good person and that his or her past was merely as a result of circumstances of crime, recidivism and addiction. As a result of this, the offenders are able to endeavor to live new lives as they continue in with their desistance. They are then able to view themselves as role models with the necessary knowledge and experience to

<https://assignbuster.com/key-theories-of-desistance-from-crime-criminology-essay/>

advice and educate the next generations, something Maruna calls, " Making Good". The major difference therefore between the desisting offenders and the persistent ones is the positive energy they surround themselves with.

Confidence and self belief are as a result pointed out to be essential qualities as they guide an offender to understand that their past was a necessary component for them to be where they are at the present. This redemptive narrative helps them realize that they are not their past and that their future is what that matters. The acknowledgement of a supreme power beyond them has also been a contributing factor in the lives of these offenders. This is because they realize that their past might have been a plan to give them the positions they hold in the present, like being counselors and youth leaders. This moral superiority and change from the past, according to Maruna, is to make up for long stretches of lost life.

During desistance according to Stephen Farrall some offenders undergo long periods of creating new social identities (2006: 85). However much these offenders change, it is not forgotten that they acknowledge they are responsible for their criminal past. Ideologies that ex-offenders feel responsibility and burden from their past crimes are actually not evidenced by researches (Maruna, 2007). Successful offenders in desistance often admit to the guilt of their past but they however rationalize their actions and justify or blame themselves and accept that circumstances might have pushed them to criminality. Sometimes however they do not accept their actions and believe that the society pushed them to crime. This however does not cultivate the necessity of an ex-offender to acknowledge the

<https://assignbuster.com/key-theories-of-desistance-from-crime-criminology-essay/>

wrongs from past life rather than putting blame on the society and the initial environment (Maruna, 2001).

The Liverpool Desistance Study prove that a concurrent characteristic of the redemption script is an offender accepting to take control of changing his future however they do not acknowledge their past crimes. However a concurrent observation is made that most candidates of successful desistance accept responsibility for their past and future and have the will to persist the challenges they will face. Maruna (2001: 88) consequently gives the summary of the desisting person's narrative as:

development of inner beliefs that truly describes an individual's personality

a positive look at an individual's capability of changing in the future

the purpose driven enthusiasm of giving back to the community particularly the next generation

## **Life-Course-Persistent and Moffitt Adolescence Deviance: Groups of Development**

Moffitt's (1993) concept of dual taxonomy of offending similarly tries to explain the processes of desistance and persistence. Moffitt (ibid) outlined that offenders can be grouped into two; adolescent limiteds and life persisters. Moffitt proposes that the two groups are different and unique from each other in their offence and desistance processes, with the life course persisters having a different aetiology to the adolescent limited offenders. It is explained that they may be suffering neurological problems that affects their cognitive and learning skills. This is therefore evidenced by

poor social skills even in the family leading to the various forms of anti social behavior and poor self control Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990). Early signs of antisocial behavior are a common characteristic of life course persisters (for example under-age drinking, premarital sex) as a result they are often excommunicated from their initial societal setting because of poor behavior, development and social bonds. Early signs of antisocial behaviors like these are normally a clear indication of a persistent criminal career in the future. This will be in connection to the age graded theory meaning there patterns of crime will be different and theirs will be a continuous cycle of events of affected marriages, work, education and relationships.

Moffitt continues to argue that adolescent limited are not affected by any neurological problems like life course persisters and are able to successfully develop their social networks and cognitive skills. Therefore the causal factors for their criminality are connected to the gap between social development, age and desires. Age for example prevents them from engaging in adult behavior like sex or drinking. As a result of deviance from their desires, they tend to associate with the life course persister leading to the growth of their deviance. However, due to their developed social skills and academic success they are likely to be able to change more easily if they choose desistance. This is because they will be able to depend on their strong social bonds for support.

Maruna (cited Laub & Sampson 2001) explains that as a result of giving more credit to dispositional rather than personality traits, the proper steps involved in discovering the consistency of criminality is achieved. Sampson and Laub note that when personality traits do not change gradually with time <https://assignbuster.com/key-theories-of-desistance-from-crime-criminology-essay/>



people are still more often capable of making a change. Researchers therefore have to examine other factors influencing personalities like personal strategies and self-perceptions Maruna (cited ibid).

## **Narrative script**

There are two distinct narrative script types in the desistance literature that highlight how criminals really view themselves and their societal roles.

For the persisters their script usually has a concurrent theme of condemnation. More often they blame external conditions like poor family relations and lack of education for their criminality. They generally have an external locus of control.

In contrast the offenders who finally become successful in desistance have a redemption script. They are complete opposites of the latter and are fully responsible for their actions. As a result they make a positive choice to stop the crime by accepting rehabilitation programmes. They are described to have an internal locus of control.

Factors that influence the particular narrative script that gets adopted by a criminal are majorly internal factors such as personality and genetics especially after rehabilitation. A higher chance of a redemptive script is noted to be as a result of intense rehabilitation.

A probation workers relationship with an offender has also been linked to affect desistance. It is there important for these officers to have empathy skills that are crucial in the process of guiding an offender to desistance as they strive to be able to re-integrate back into the society.

## **Relevance of desistance theory**

The desistance theory is relevant in a number of different applied and academic professions. The desistance theory to researchers may provide a foundation to be able to examine the different factors that contribute to the cessation of a criminal offence from a theoretical view. The desistance theory allows for a number of different crimes in history and their approaches like the Lombrosian biological positivism, to have consideration in the present society which has an evident difference in its ways of thinking. As a result criminology is more understood and its relationship with other disciplines like psychology, politics and social policy acknowledged. This will consequently allow the development of collaboration for a positive cause of reducing re offence rates.

The desistance theory on a practical level has assisted the criminal justice system (CJS) to identify possible solutions to cases of reoffending of successful candidates of desistance through for example initiating community based sentences. This kind of programme is sure to gradually decrease the number of criminals in HM Prison Service institutions for short periods.

Studies have shown that short-term sentences in prisons for example (those for less than six months) often lead to increased crime rates after release. This is well explained by the fact that these short-term prisoners do not undergo complete metamorphosis from not covering all the rehabilitation programs. Their exposure to the hard core criminals in the prisons who have been there for longer and have been experienced criminals also contributes to their overall change.

<https://assignbuster.com/key-theories-of-desistance-from-crime-criminology-essay/>

In addition desistance theory assists in the continuous development of training programmes for the respective professionals responsible for working with ex-offenders in the community. For example the Probation Service (see 'Narrative script' section, above).

## **Controversies**

It is important for the general public to realize that desistance is achievable and takes time. Offenders should therefore not be viewed as bad people who cannot live with others even after rehabilitation programs. The public is therefore advised not to discriminate these groups of people in their society.

Reintegration cases of offenders back into the society have always caused massive outrages by a large percentage of the public community. There are numerous related cases of such circumstances that have often been quite difficult and delicate to handle. For example in 2011, the case of the reintegration of Jason Owen, he had been imprisoned for allegedly taking part in the killing of Baby P (Peter Connelly) in 2007, and in 2011 he was the released after his sentence was over. The Sun newspaper immediately kicked off a campaign to find him. Readers were urged to write and report to the newspaper of any knowledge of his whereabouts. There was an article in the same newspaper that sent sentiments of outrage over the fact that the ex-convict had actually tried to find a job.

This is a clear indication of how the effort of successful psychological research can be nullified by 'news' reports in the popular media. This kind of outrageous reporting is especially a common characteristic of Tabloid newspapers. Their influence over the public is often impressive and they are

as a result able to manipulate and affect the attitudes of the wider public towards their view of desistance and offenders. As a result of this, future recidivism is often developed gradually due to the ill-informed public. Newspapers then use this recidivism as 'proof' of their initial correctness.

## **Conclusion**