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## The *Liverpool Desistance Study* and probation practice: Opening the dialogue

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**Abstract** The notion of ‘desistance’ (or ‘going straight’) is becoming a more prominent one in criminological discourse, and the *Liverpool Desistance Study* (LDS) aimed to provide a deeper understanding of this process from the perspective of the individuals taking this life path. However, the LDS was not intended to address how the research might be applied in practice. This article therefore briefly outlines the research and discusses some of the policy implications, in order to open a debate with practitioners and others about the way that the research might be relevant to everyday practice with people who offend. The papers that follow this article were written in response to the challenge of applying the findings of the LDS in probation practice.

**Keywords** desistance, generativity, narrative, reintegration, strengths-based

We want to start by thanking the editor and editorial board of the *Probation Journal* for this opportunity to reflect on the findings of the *Liverpool Desistance Study* (LDS) and in particular their implications for probation practice in the UK. The LDS was not an applied study of probation practice. We never set out to determine ‘what works’ in offender reintegration or to evaluate the effectiveness of any specific efforts. The goal, as we understood it at the time, was to provide a deeper understanding of the process of ‘desistance’ (or ‘going straight’) from the perspective of the individuals taking this life path. The work emerged out of our reading of the literature on ‘crime and the life course’ emerging in the early 1990s (Moffitt, 1993; Sampson and Laub, 1993) and was intended to

complement (not supplant or critique) this work on the basic science of developmental criminology.

Nonetheless, we have been surprised and impressed with the response that the study has had outside the walls of academia. Since the publication of the book *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives* (Maruna, 2001) detailing the major findings from our research, the first author has received a steady stream of extremely gratifying letters and emails from ex-prisoners, probation officers, and other practitioners and activists. Many of these correspondents have asked us to spell out more clearly exactly what the implications of the LDS research might be for resettlement practice. We had been reluctant to include such a direct policy discussion in *Making Good*, preferring that the findings of the research speak for themselves. In our view, practitioners have the greatest insight into their own clients' needs and the particular environmental context they face. As such, decisions about how research such as ours is best put into practice should largely be left to these ground-level experts.

Nonetheless, since the publication of *Making Good*, we have made some effort to enter the academic debate about 'best practices' for reintegrating ex-prisoners (e.g. see Maruna, Immarigeon, and LeBel, 2004; Maruna and LeBel, 2002; Maruna, LeBel, and Lanier, 2004; Maruna and Ramsden, 2004; Maruna, LeBel, Mitchel and Naples, forthcoming). In an effort to draw on both academic research and real world expertise in these applied discussions, all of these pieces have been co-written with criminal justice practitioners like Russ Immarigeon and Derek Ramsden and/or former prisoners (now 'convict criminologists'<sup>1</sup>) such as Charlie Lanier, Thomas P. LeBel and Nick Mitchell. The following policy discussion, therefore, will draw upon these collaborations as well as the very rewarding correspondence we have had with former prisoners and experienced practitioners since the publication of *Making Good*. We begin, however, with a quick review of the LDS findings for those unfamiliar with the book.

## **The Liverpool Desistance Study**

### ***A brief history***

The *Liverpool Desistance Study* began, essentially, as a one-person operation funded mostly out of pocket with some assistance from the US Fulbright Commission in 1995–1996, then the H.F. Guggenheim Foundation in 1996–1997. The first author wanted to learn about the process of 'going straight' from the point of view of ex-prisoners and, as such, made an effort to immerse himself into the world of ex-prisoners living in Liverpool. This meant spending nearly every day as an observer/pest at Nacro Merseyside or at one of several probation offices and independent reintegration programmes in the area. It also involved a month-long stay at a men's hostel near the centre of Liverpool and sustained friendships with a half dozen or so former prisoners.

During this time, Maruna began locating a 'snowball sample' of former prisoners to take part in a more formal study of the desistance process. The idea of

snowball sampling is fairly simple: the more former prisoners he met, the more they would introduce him to other former prisoners, and the bigger the sample grew. This method worked well enough that eventually Maruna became reasonably well known as ‘the American that does interviews with former prisoners’ (or more likely, as ‘the crazy Yank who will pay you to talk about your life’) and volunteers eventually started finding him (sometimes in the form of late night phone calls to his home) rather than the other way around.

Around 1997, the project team<sup>2</sup> was able to expand greatly, first with the help of a grant to evaluate four reintegration schemes for drug misusers on Merseyside (see Canter et al., 1998), and, second, as a result of a generous grant from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (see Canter et al., 2001). This combination of good fortune and great colleagues allowed us to transform a small-scale, exploratory study into a full-fledged research project with a unique and well-matched sample suitable for quantification and hypothesis-testing.

### Research design

The basic design behind the LDS was fairly simple – indeed, it turned out to be overly simplistic. The original idea was to locate two samples of ex-prisoners: one group that had returned to crime upon release, and another group that was ‘going straight’. Then, we would see whether desisting ex-offenders tended to share some characteristic ways of thinking and whether these patterns systematically differed from the way active offenders saw the world. Our assumption was that if certain thought patterns really did distinguish one group from the other, then this mindset might be implicated in the process of desistance.

Although we clung to this rather textbook design throughout, we soon learned that the premise it was based upon was largely false. That is, ex-prisoners do not come in two types: successful reformers and unsuccessful recidivists. The vast majority of ex-prisoners we met through the various fieldwork opportunities in the study could not be categorized as either ‘desisting’ or ‘persisting’ but were rather in the grey area somewhere in between. This middle ground, which David Matza (1964) described so well 40 years ago in *Delinquency and Drift*, is the real story when it comes to understanding the criminal ‘careers’ of ex-prisoners.

Yet, focusing on the extreme cases of clearly persisting and clearly desisting ex-prisoners allowed us to better understand the beginning and end point of the reform process, whilst still using a cross-sectional design. Indeed, our sample really was ‘extreme’ in some senses and this is partially what makes the study so unique. For instance, the ‘persisting’ offenders we included in the research were really persisting. Unlike the captive audience of prisoners that make up most studies of so-called ‘offenders’, the ‘persisting’ group in our study consisted of individuals living in the Liverpool area who were willing to admit to an active engagement in criminal pursuits and with no immediate plans to end this involvement. By contrast, our ‘desisting’ sample members were making a conscious effort to ‘go straight’ and had been doing so for at least a year’s time despite long histories of previous criminal involvement.

The two groups were meant to be ‘matched’ with similar profiles in terms of age (around 30 years old), criminal records (around three years in prison), and

basic demographics: most left school at 16 without qualifications, were arrested for the first time at age 15 and went to prison for the first time at age 20. All of the research participants completed a number of standard questionnaires, but the focus of the interview was a life story interview modified from McAdams (1993). Participants were asked to tell us the story of their lives as if they were writing an autobiography.

The transcripts that emerged from these discussions were content analysed both for patterns in their substantive content and psychosocial themes. In addition to a holistic analysis of the overall narrative structure, select aspects of the narratives were content-coded by two graduate students, blind to all identifying information on the participants, for quantitative validation of the hypothesized differences between persisting and desisting narratives. This content analysis utilized well-established content dictionaries to code for narrative themes like generativity and agency, as well as the use of excuses, justifications and other neutralizations. The goal of this comparative analysis was to determine what aspects of the common desistance narrative are unique to ex-offenders who avoid crime, and what aspects are shared by active offenders.

## Summary of Key Findings

### *The psychology of persistent offending*

The active offenders in the LDS sample were not 'average' offenders in the sense that they were not 15 years old and drifting in and out of delinquent activity. In order to be comparable with the desisting group, this sample had an average age of 30 and a criminal record 'as long as your arm', so these interviewees represented the hard side of the 'hardened' criminal of lore. Yet, what seemed to best characterize this group was not so much their callousness as much as their seeming complacency in their lot, a syndrome we called feeling 'doomed to deviance'. For instance, one 33 year-old addict and middle-level heroin dealer told us:

(My ex-wife) said, like, 'If you got off heroin now, I'd come back', you know, but I'm happy the way I am. I'm just happy to plod along, and I know I've got a habit. I'm at the stage now where I'm resigned to the fact that I'm an addict and I'm going to be an addict to the day I die, and nothing's going to change that.  
(Male, 33 yrs)

Likewise, a 28 year-old interviewee explained:

The reality is I'll never be able to get a straight, decent job . . . So, it looks like I'm back to crime, doesn't it? (Male, 28 yrs)

After years of denying their essential criminality, these individuals had learned to accept that they would never succeed in life outside of criminal pursuits. They saw themselves very much as 'pawns' or victims of forces outside of their control. Indeed, the interview question that best differentiated active offenders from our

desisting sample involved what they imagine their future will be like five or 10 years down the road. For the active offenders in our sample, the question almost made no sense.

*SM: What do you see in your life, say five or 10 years down the road?*

I'm scared to think that far ahead actually. Right now, I'm just living one day at a time. You can't afford to look any further I suppose, 'cause you just don't know what's around the next corner. You know what I mean? (Male, 38 yrs)

This was not always necessarily negative. As in the response from the following 29 year-old active car thief:

*SM: How about long term, five or 10 years down the road? Any vision?*

I haven't got a vision to be truthful, long term. Maybe I'll win the lottery, you know. (Male, 29 yrs)

In fact, a surprising number of interviewees mentioned wanting to win the lottery as one of their 'daily strivings' or personal objectives in life in answers to another question. This far-fetched ambition makes perfect sense with a mindset that views the future as essentially a matter of luck with no connection to one's own agentic efforts.

In short, active offenders describe life very much in deterministic, almost mechanical terms. They talk about being caught up in a cycle of poverty, stigma, and criminal associates. Instead of cognitive distortions or 'criminal thinking', a great deal of this thinking actually seemed quite level-headed from our point of view as social scientists. Indeed, many of the interviewees gave the impression that they would make exceptional sociologists themselves.

### ***The psychology of desistance***

Ironically, it is the desisting sample members, those who are 'going straight', who have the more difficult challenge in accounting for why they are not still committing crimes. Persistence in the face of the 'vicious circle' of crime and punishment makes good sense, but desisting in the face of these same obstacles requires some explanation. In fact, we argue that desistance seems to require its own brand of cognitive distortion, or what Shelley Taylor (1989) calls 'positive illusions'. In the LDS analysis, we found three basic examples of this in the reform narratives of desisting ex-prisoners.

First, the criminal past is essentially denied. That is, the person admits 'I did it', but the person who did those things, wasn't the 'real me'. This phrase was repeated so often in the interviews that we named a chapter after it in *Making Good*:

Then me mum found out what I was doing (heroin use and burglary). She come to the flat and got me, um, brought me home. She knew I had a bad problem. I was a different person, psychologically. I just – *it weren't me*. (Male, 25 yrs)

The idea here, repeated by dozens of interviewees, was that the offending came from 'out there' not from inside the person, who is essentially good underneath it all. This point was made eloquently by a 30 year-old participant in the LDS:

It was just that, um, I realized that the entire thing had all been an act, my entire life, all me criminal offences, all me drug taking, it was all a sham. . . . It was just like what it was, was right at the core of me, I am who I am now, who I've always been inside. I've always been intelligent, right, inside. I've always been intelligent, honest, hard working, truthful, erm, nice, you know, loving. I've always like. But it was always wrapped up in so much shit it couldn't get out. Um and it's only now that . . . I've realized that. That that wasn't who I was, I did it all to try and, to try and find out who I was. . . . That's what people I knew were doing, people I looked up to and . . . you know I was just adapting. I used to adapt to me peers, which most people do, but some people choose the right peers. (Male, 30 yrs)

The second pattern that seemed to characterize reform narratives is what we called 'Tragic Optimism' borrowing Frankl's (1959[1984]) famous phrase. Here, the desisting narrators were able to find some silver lining in even the bleakest past, transforming a life of shame into something of direct and explicit value.

Like, the way I see it, if I could stop even one person taking drugs again, it would be enough. I don't want to be a drug counsellor or nothing like that, but if you can learn off what I'm telling you and *stop one person going through the life that I've gone through*, that's an achievement, isn't it? A big achievement, 'cause I wouldn't like anyone to go through what I've gone through and what I've put me family through as well, you know what I mean? (Male, 33 yrs)

I just woke up one morning and said, 'I've got to put this to use now.' You know, I can actually tell youngsters where I'm coming from and basically what jail's about. And that's what I want to do. That's me aim. It's gonna take me a couple years to get settled in, 'cause I'm actually starting some work now for probation. It's gonna take me six or seven months before I actually start. I'm gonna be buzzin' with that, you know what I mean? (Male, 30 yrs)

A lifetime that is deemed a 'waste' or a shame can be 'put to use' by saving one – 'even just one' – other life from repeating the same mistakes. This cautionary story was frequently intended as a 'gift' for the next generation:

I was saying to (my brother's) kids the other day. I'd sat both of them down the other day, and I said, 'Listen, me and your dad have wasted our lives. I don't want you to do what we've done. For 15 or 16 years, me and your dad wasted our lives, and now we want you to take a leaf out of our book.' (Male, 33 yrs)

Finally, the third strategy we identified was to preserve continuity in one's life narrative by making desistance a rebel act. Criminologists sometimes characterize desistance as a process of 'burning out' or 'giving up', whereby wild, young offenders are essentially beaten down and tamed by the criminal justice system and other forces of social control. True or not, LDS interviewees almost never used such language. Instead, their vision of desistance is one of renewal, gaining strength, finding who they really are, or bettering themselves.

Even though some might see desistance as the ultimate in conformity – conforming to the laws and mores of the mainstream – LDS participants described the process as breaking out of the chains of social control. 'The System', as they

explain it, does everything it can to keep ex-offenders trapped in the cycle of crime and prison. By going straight, the ex-prisoner is actually committing the ultimate act of rebellion according to this revisionist narrative. This interpretive strategy allows the former offender to maintain a sense of continuity in his or her autobiography and personality. After all, these are individuals who have portrayed and understood themselves as defiant rebels all of their lives. It is difficult to imagine such a person transforming overnight from a wild one to a choir boy. Such a shift may simply be too incongruent to be believable. However, by transforming desistance from an acquiescence to authority into a rebellious act, they can simultaneously preserve their identities and change their behaviour.

## Implications for probation practice

Since the first studies on desistance in criminology (e.g. Glueck and Glueck, 1937[1966]), there has been a tendency to assume that research about how people desist from crime on their own could aid in the improvement of correctional work (see also Farrall, 2004; Rex, 1999). In light of their own findings regarding 'maturational reform' in 1937, for instance, the Gluecks asked, 'Can educators, psychologists, correctional workers, and others devise means of "forcing the plant," as it were, so that benign maturation will occur earlier than it seems to at present?' (Glueck and Glueck, 1937, p. 205).

Of course, more research is needed before generalizing from our own quite small research study,<sup>3</sup> but the most obvious implication of the LDS findings is that such practitioners should take words seriously – both the words they use and the words they hear from their clients. Back in 1963, the eminent criminologist Donald Cressey argued that, 'Criminals and delinquents become dishonest because of the words available to them':

A great deal of evidence supporting the importance of verbalizations in criminal and non-criminal conduct is found in the literature, but it never has been systematically collected and published. . . . Lindsmith reported that if a person habituated to drugs talked to himself in certain ways he will become an addict . . . . Becker showed that perception of the effect of marijuana was determined by the kinds of words given to the smoker by users (Cressey, 1963, p. 151).

If we are right that words are also implicated in the desistance process, it follows that educators, psychologists, correctional workers and, indeed those in probation, ought to be careful about the stories they tell their clients. The self-narratives we humans carry with us are not created in a vacuum. They are rational adaptations from within existing paradigms of public discourse. According to Foote and Frank (1999, p. 177), 'The power of the dominant discourse is to include some stories as tellable and to exclude others as marginal and abnormal'. Our self-stories are also likely to be somewhat related to (although not perfect reflections of) the discourse we are told about ourselves from those in authority ('This is all you'll ever amount to', 'You can do anything you set your mind to', etc.). The findings of the LDS suggest that certain stories may be better suited to supporting desistance from

crime in contemporary British society than others. As such, it would make sense for practitioners hoping to promote desistance to draw upon this language in their work.

At the moment, contemporary probation practice is dominated by a discourse of 'risk' and 'needs'. Probation clients are thought to have an endless range of social, psychological and moral deficits that need to be 'assessed' and hopefully 'treated' or at least 'targeted' (and then re-assessed) by professionals. Although this may be a perfectly legitimate model of effective practice, caution is needed about the messages being conveyed in this sort of work. When the probation relationship is reduced to one of targeting risks and needs, these deficits may become a reified and internalized aspect of the probation client's self-identity (see Ward and Stewart, 2003).

Especially in efforts to reintegrate ex-prisoners back into society, it may make sense to balance such talk of risks and needs with an emphasis on the person's potential 'strengths' (see also Nissen and Clark, 2003; Maruna and LeBel, 2003). The language of personal redemption and overcoming challenges was particularly salient to the desisting participants in the LDS. Empowering ex-prisoners to 'earn their way back' into the mainstream through demonstrations of their 'true' inner character could reasonably become an element of probation work. In the language of the now defunct New Careers Movement, a goal of the probation relationship could be to 'transform receivers of help into dispensers of help' (Pearl and Riessman, 1965, pp. 88–89) through the encouragement of voluntary service and community leadership. Such work, drawing on the strengths and talents of the probation client, can send 'a message to the community that the offender is worthy of further support, and to the offender that s/he has something to offer that is of value to others' (Bazemore and Erbe, 2004, p. 45). The latter is especially crucial as self-efficacious beliefs seem to be important for successful desistance.

One of the dimensions that best differentiated active from desisting offenders in the LDS research was the lack of a future-orientation, indicating that probation work should focus as much as possible on anticipating, planning for, and taking control over one's future rather than dwelling on past mistakes (see also Farrall, 2004). Nonetheless, the LDS findings suggest that probation clients also need to make sense out of their past lives, so language is important in interpreting past criminal events as well. Typically, therapeutic efforts with offenders stress the importance of offenders taking full responsibility for their crimes, and counsellors are trained to identify and punish attempts to minimize, deny or excuse one's past offending. The LDS findings suggest that not all excuses are equally criminogenic, and some may actually be rather benign. For instance, desisting sample members in the LDS often accepted that they did many things wrong in their lives, but argued that the person who committed those acts was not really them ('that person wasn't the real me').

Although it seems almost sacrilegious for those counselling offenders today to do anything but insist upon complete blame and shame acceptance, in other cultures the narrative of 'not the real me' is widely accepted and actively encouraged in correctional reform. For instance, according to John Braithwaite (1989), Japanese idiom frequently accounts for wrongdoing with possession by a 'mushi' (worm or bug):

Criminals are therefore not acting according to their true selves; they are victims of a 'mushi' which can be 'sealed off,' 'thus permitting people to be restored to the community without guilt' [Wagatsuma & Rosett, 1986, p. 476]. The cultural assumption of basic goodness and belief in each individual's capacity for eventual self-correction means that 'nurturant acceptance' ('amayakashi') is the appropriate response to deviance once shame has been projected to and accepted by the deviant. (Braithwaite, 1989, pp. 64–65)

The Navajo Nation in North America has a similar concept referred to as the 'nayée' according to Braithwaite and Braithwaite (2001, p. 10). Nayée (or 'monsters') are things like depression, jealousy and the like that keep a person from living the way they want to. The benefit of naming something a nayée is that 'the source of one's illness – or unhappiness or dysfunctionality – once named can be cured' (Coker, 1999, p. 55).

However it is done, individuals need to make sense out of their past crimes and misdemeanours and ideally learn or even gain from them if possible. Likewise, the LDS suggests that desistance is best facilitated when the individual has a good story for why he or she is no longer in a situation where offending is a possibility. Just wanting to avoid another prison stay may not be enough of an explanation (as the active offenders we interviewed wanted the same thing). Better explanatory themes seem to involve wanting to avoid prison because they are 'better than that' or because they want 'something to show' for their lives. Generative themes (wanting to create something of lasting value, leave a mark on the world, pass something on to the next generation, or inspire others) seem to appeal to ageing adults in much the same way that more consumerist values (wanting to experience new things, pushing limits, get high) appeal to the young. Probation relationships featuring these generative narratives, rather than deterrence-based threats of revocation, may be more likely to promote lasting change in individual behaviour.

Of course, messages like these come from numerous sources, and even the best probation relationship cannot always counter the discourse of 'the streets' or a consumerist society emphasizing the (transitory) healing potentials of 'bling bling' or the next criminal adventure. The best a probation worker can do, in some cases, is to raise the possibility of alternative narratives of the self, inspiring hope and self-belief at the same time as targeting such, quite real, risks and needs.

## Notes

- 1 This phrase is from a new movement of former prisoners who are now active teachers and researchers in criminology and prison studies in particular (see Ross and Richards, 2003), but it should be noted that Lanier, LeBel and Mitchell are not themselves associated with this group of scholars.
- 2 Louise Porter and Samantha Lundrigan, both at the University of Liverpool at the time, came on board as associate researchers in 1996, and Irene Carvalho and Donna Youngs followed along soon after. Professor David Canter was the project supervisor.
- 3 In recent years, a number of subsequent studies with diverse samples have provided important corroborating evidence in this regard (see e.g., Giordano,

Cernkovich and Rudolph, 2002; Terry, 2003). Moreover, the LDS findings are hardly new and aberrant. Echoes of almost all of our findings can be found in previous research on desistance (e.g., Burnett, 1992; Mischkowitz, 1994), recovery from substance misuse (e.g., O'Reilly, 1997) or related areas of personal transformation and identity development.

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