

WHY DO PEOPLE GO STRAIGHT?

The Dynamics of Desistance: Charting Pathways through Change. By Deirdre Healy. Cullompton, Devon, U.K., Willan Publishing, 2010. 228 pp. \$69.95 (hard cover).

In the United States, most students studying criminology are exposed to numerous lectures, monographs, and books on criminality. However while all students of criminology are aware that most criminals eventually cease their unlawful activities, few are taught the reasons why people involved in crime “graduate” to a crime free lifestyle at some point in their lives. The reason so few students in this country are taught why some people “desist” from crime is because even fewer academics study this phenomenon. This is not so in Europe.

Desistance is the study of why people change from a life of crime to one of law abiding behavior. Deirdre Healy, an Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS) Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the Institute of Criminology, University College Dublin, has just written a book exploring the nexus between social and personal forces in the desistance process. This book consists of nine chapters, a preface, general introduction, appendix, references, and an index. The book has a number of valuable tables and figures that make the author’s argument more understandable. The references are also quite extensive.

At the outset it should be noted that this is a very complex topic. It is not just that there are a number of social, economic, situational, and psychological reasons why a person may desist from criminal activity, but desistance is not a linear or abrupt process; just as criminals do not engage in criminal activity constantly and may go through cycles when they do not engage in any criminal activity, desisters may not come to some sudden revelation and immediately cease all their criminal activities. Thus the author describes the pathway to desistance as tumultuous, dynamic, and uncertain.

The author notes that longitudinal studies reveal that criminal activity tends to peak in adolescence and then taper off in young adulthood. This phenomenon, known as “the age-crime curve,” shows that by the age of 28, most offenders have ceased to be involved in crime. Hence the author concludes that desistance from crime is the norm rather than the exception. However, recognizing the phenomenon and understanding the reasons are two entirely different matters. It is the attempt to formulate a theory of desistance that has recently intrigued criminal justice thinkers in Europe.

Healy describes desistance as a two stage process. The first consists of any hiatus in criminal activity, which she refers to as primary desistance, and the second comprises a more permanent state of non-offending that she refers to as secondary desistance. An offender may begin the stage of primary desistance for a number of reasons. The most likely reasons however are because the person

gets tired of being arrested and going to jail or prison, the offender has formed a personal attachment with another person and realizes that time spent in prison or jail will be lost time with that significant other, and because the offender successfully attended a therapeutic or educational program. Thus the author identifies the deterrent effect of punishment, social bonding, and external interventions as contributing to the initial decision to cease criminal activity.

The author contends that research indicates that there are several factors involved in a person transitioning from primary to secondary desistance. The first involves human agency, i. e., personal or free will. The offender who moves to the secondary stage of desistance tends to believe that he or she can make a successful transition and even when recognizing the obstacles the person may face along the way, still believes that he or she will overcome those challenges. People who do not make the transition, on the other hand, tend to view themselves in passive terms. Thus offenders who recognize volition as an essential element in their life narrative are much more likely to live crime free lives than those who do not. Or, as Healy otherwise states “the salience of psychological factors supports the view that offenders are active participants in desistance and do not simply respond passively to social events.”

The second factor leading to secondary desistance is the person assumes a new personal identity, one in which the person no longer identifies as a criminal but now a law-abiding individual. Moreover in formulating a positive self narrative the desister interprets past events in terms that support his or her new self-identity. The author states that desisters attempt to gain something positive from their criminal pasts by drawing insights from past events in their lives and by integrating the past into their new identities. Offenders who do not successfully transition to secondary desistance tend to reject their past and do not find any meaning in past experiences that can be incorporated into a new self narrative.

The third factor leading to secondary desistance is the establishment of social capital. The author explains that in order for change to occur, the offender needs not just the motivation to change but also the capacity to change. Hence, Healy emphasizes that unless the offender is also provided with opportunities to exercise his or her new-found skills; i. e., have access to the necessary social capital, then there will be insufficient factors to bring about lasting change. Moreover the author states that while research indicates that both static and dynamic factors contribute to desistance, it is the dynamic factors that are more important.

This book has serious implications regarding the utilization of evidence-based practices. The author does not advocate dispensing with evidence based practices but does question its long term effectiveness in preventing recidivism. Healy argues that it is social factors that appear to have a long term effect on behavior and that research suggests their effects are not immediate but are amplified slowly over time. The author further contends that research suggests

that while cognitive-behavioral programs can have a highly significant short-term effect on recidivism, it does not reduce re-offending in the long-term.

The author states that advocates of the risk factor approach believe that if they can identify a consistent set of risk factors, this information can be used to design interventions to address these problems areas and this will, in turn, lower participants' risk of offending. However, Healy argues that while certain factors consistently emerge as correlates of recidivism, the ability of these factors to predict behavior is less evident when measured prospectively, particularly in the long term.

What is needed is "evidence-based practices plus." The author states that efforts to reduce risks and needs should be supplemented with attempts to increase social and human capital and develop individual strengths. Thus assessments should not be done away with and cognitive-behavioral programs should remain in place. However Healy stresses that these measures alone will not lead to permanent desistance.

Healy has written a very valuable and thought provoking book. She has identified a subject matter that should be given greater attention by criminal justice practitioners in this country. While there is much more to learn about desistance, she has shed much light on this subject. In addition, Healy has raised some serious questions regarding the reliance – or perhaps overreliance – on evidence based practices. In doing so she has issued a challenge to the field of community corrections to design better programs and develop newer approaches that will have a longer lasting effect on recidivism.

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