

Ontological Theory and Women' Desistance : Is it simply a case of 'Growing Up'?

Introduction

"I've just got to grow up really, more than anything." - Marie

This article critically explores the ontological theory of desistance from offending as put forward by authors such as Glueck and Glueck (1950) and Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990). These authors argue that offending is a behaviour that most individuals will 'naturally' desist from. This article examines the desistance journeys as travelled by a small group of Northshire-based women. As a starting point, it is worth considering the average age of the women interviewed as part of this study. The average age of the women interviewed was 39 at the time of first interview. The average age of last offence was 37. It can be immediately surmised that for the women involved in this study, offending was not a behaviour limited to adolescence. Yet as will be seen, the women in this study represent a variety of offending trajectories. For example, there are women interviewed who had only ever committed one offence, women who confined their offending to later in life and there is some qualitative support nonetheless for the power of aging and the passage of time in the desistance process.

Literature Review

The longest-held theory of desistance emerges from the Gluecks' (1950) study of juvenile delinquency. It was here that the link was made between ageing and the decline of criminal or delinquent behaviour. The study concluded that 'ageing is the only factor which emerges as significant in the reform process' (1950: 105). The Gluecks suggested that desistance was a natural process which happened spontaneously and without the influence of other factors. Speaking at a

1997 conference, Shadd Maruna described this explanation as 'the most influential theory of desistance in criminology' (published, 1999).

The offending which traditional criminology tends to focus on is usually confined to young adulthood. Illegal warmongers, large scale environmental polluters, corrupt bankers and politicians aside, the offending which traditional criminology centres on tends to be that committed by young adults. As Bottoms and Shapland concede, the 'criminality of even recidivist offenders declines sharply in the age range 20-30' (2011: 44), and this is true of both recorded and self-reported offending patterns. McIvor et al. (2000) in their study of young people in Scotland, have agreed that offending is usually a 'transitory phenomenon'. Ontogenetic explanations suggest that the age-crime curve can be easily explained by ageing in itself. Desistance therefore is linked to individual biological processes and the passage of time whilst deviance can be explained as something that (most) offenders will eventually 'grow out of' (Gove, 1985). As Gottfredson and Hirschi maintain in their *General Theory of Crime*, 'spontaneous desistance is just that, change in behaviour... that occurs regardless of what else happens' (1990: 136).

This 'aging out process' explanation of offending trajectories has been subject to much criticism in more contemporary desistance studies. Bushway et al. (2001) suggest that whilst it is true that as individuals age, their likely involvement in criminal activities or deviant behaviour decreases, this explanation 'offers no insight into the causal mechanisms that generate these changes' (pg. 492 - 93). As Rungay (2004) elaborates, if we are to believe that desistance is a natural process, that is the same as suggesting that external factors are unnecessary to promote desistance and therefore virtually eradicates the need for any form of intervention, whether this is practical or psychological. A worrying consequence of viewing desistance in this way may be the suppression of public support for rehabilitative programmes and re-integrative services (Maruna, 2001).

Maruna (2001) critiques the idea that desistance is linked to biological ageing. Age not only accounts for changes in biology or physiology but also in subjective beliefs, attitudes, life experiences and

social contexts including experiences of social or institutional processes not limited to the CJS (Weaver and McNeill, 2010). Monica Barry (2006) has argued that desistance is not just a natural consequence of the aging process but is a process which is more likely because of the increased opportunities for social recognition through both the desire to care for others in a generative fashion and the responsibility taking that aging offers. Moreover, the ontogenetic explanation does not account for differences in offending patterns over time, including differences within gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background etc. nor does this theory reveal the underlying sociological processes associated with aging. As Sampson and Laub (1992) maintain, maturational reform theorists fail to 'unpack' the meaning of age. This article will therefore explore the ontological process of desistance as considered from the narratives of a group of Northshire based women.

Methodology

The research presented in this article is based on observations conducted from Spring 2013 to Spring 2014 at five Women's Centres (WCs) located across Northshire as well as 23 semi-structured interviews with women with recent convictions (n= 16) and staff members (n= 6) [one woman, Rebecca, fell into both categories]. These women with recent convictions were either part of the Housing for Northshire (HfN) Project or were completing/ had recently completed Specified Activity Orders at Northshire WCs. Narratives were collected, content-coded and analysed for patterns in tone, theme, plot, roles, value structure, coherence and complexity (Maruna, 2001) using N-Vivo software. In the current article, the focus will be on the narratives of six of these women. Their narratives broadly represent the trajectories of the women in general.

Support for the ontological theory of desistance

Some of the women interviewed as part of this study followed a 'typical' offending trajectory of offending during their late teens and early twenties followed by a decline into adulthood. In

particular, the narratives of Holly and Grace who were 23 and 31 respectively at the time of interview reflected this pattern. For Holly, 'deviant' behaviours began in high school.

UB: And what were you like when you were at school?

Holly: I got kicked out in year 10

UB: What happened?

H: I got excluded for fighting with some girls, me and my best friend. So we both got excluded at the same time

UB: And did you go back after that?

H: No we got kicked out permanently; I didn't go to another school after that

UB: What were your first experiences of offending?

H: Skiving

UB: When did that start?

H: Year 9

UB: And why was that?

H: It were 'cause everyone else were doing it so I followed into their footsteps. And most of my friends from where I live had been excluded so I think it were just the normal thing.
(Holly, Age 23)

Holly notes that at the time being excluded was not something she worried about, indeed she notes that she felt "happy at the time 'cause all my friends were excluded... but I regret it now." From here there was a period where Holly remembers being regularly cautioned by the police for "just bits and bats and stuff like criminal damage and drunk and disorderly, just little bits like that". Holly relates offending during this time to her friends and the area in which she lived where the behaviour was routine and normalised. However, whilst for Holly's best friend Ciara, becoming a mother signalled a turning point, Holly carried on offending once her friend had desisted and when she became a mother to her own four year old daughter.

She got pregnant and that, settled down and stuff, she stopped doing everything and I still carried on. (Holly, Age 23)

Recently however, Holly has expressed a desire to stop offending and “settle down” herself. This process began with giving up smoking cannabis when her partner, Nick was released from prison recently.

‘Cause like everyone around me were, my cousins and my friends and that, everyone were smoking it so, I was just doing what everyone else around me were doing. But then he’d stopped when he were inside so I stopped smoking ‘cause he weren’t and we were on two different levels so I’ve cut everything out now, I just smoke tobacco. (Holly, Age 23)

Whilst stopping smoking cannabis, just like becoming a mother, did not automatically lead to stopping shoplifting for Holly, she has since moved in with Nick. They hope to regain custody of their daughter from Holly’s grandmother soon and look forward to a “stable” future. At the time of interview, Holly had not shoplifted nor otherwise offended for “five or six months”. Holly notes that amongst her peers, “everyone is growing up a bit now.” In particular, Holly makes reference to her older brother who has followed a very maturational (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990) desistance pathway with elements of the social bonds thesis (Sampson and Laub, 1993).

He were getting into crime at one point. He got sent down, he got sent down for like three and a half year... it was like for fighting and stuff, he were always lashing out at people. And then he met a really nice girl and she works at the chemist round there near Rivertown and he’s got a job now, he works doing boiler installations and he’s got a kid on the way so it’s right good. She’s only seven weeks so they’re right happy. He’s settled down now. He hasn’t been in trouble for a few year now. (Holly, Age 23)

Bringing together Gottfredson and Hirschi’s theory of developmental self-control, Laub and Sampson (2001) for example argue that, ‘traits like self-control can change over time as a consequence of changes in the quality or strength of social ties’ (p.7). Holly’s brother certainly appears to follow this trajectory in Holly’s subjective narrative. As a female with a history of domestic abuse, mental

health issues and self-harm as well as being a mother, Holly's own desistance journey will arguably require more support than her brother's journey. Her journey will not only involve looking to the future but also recovering from the past. Yet it is clear that for Holly "growing up" naturally involves a move away from offending. Just as the beginnings of offending were a natural process for Holly once her peers began offending, attempts towards desistance have now also been normalised as part of this process of "growing up".

For Grace, drinking alcohol and smoking cannabis also began in secondary school.

UB: ...what were you like at school? You said you were quiet?

Grace: Yeah, as I say I was very good, I liked going to school, the teachers liked me, I was always you know, top marks for everything... Got to high school, and it just went downhill from there basically. I think, just, you know, got in with the wrong people and you know other circumstances along the way. I started smoking weed quite young, I was 12, maybe 13, em... drinking at weekends, to the point of passing out, you know having to be carried home and that... basically just buying cannabis, I have no other offences other than that one that's basically on... Apart from when I was 16 I was caught shoplifting. (Grace, Age 31)

Whilst Grace felt that she had matured since her early offending, she was recently charged with a drugs offence for growing cannabis. Whilst Grace's most recent offence was associated with choice and indeed careful consideration, it did not indicate a move away from her pro-social identity which was based around her role as a mother. For Grace therefore this offence was associated with bad luck and did not reflect a deviation from her pro-social identity (of course we may question Grace's 'vocabulary of motive' [Wright Mills, 1940] speaking to myself as a researcher here or to justice practitioners in the past. Nonetheless her subjective interpretation is important despite 'techniques of neutralisation' [Matza and Sykes, 1964] employed).

I was growing cannabis, um... I will say it was the wrong thing but for all the right reasons, there was reasons why I did it. I had a young daughter and the house, the house that I'm still in, it's, you know in winter, it's very cold, it's drafty, and somebody offered. I didn't go out looking for it, somebody offered for, if I were to set up some plants, you know whatever they made of it, they would give me half, and, you know it's like two and a half grand, it's a lot of money when you haven't got and I were thinking about it and I basically worked out I could do it twice a year, all I had to do was water them, that's all I have to do with them. And then, April, round about my daughter's birthday, I would get a big lump sum then, and then like in the winter, just before Christmas, I'd get another lump, so it was sorta like it would see me through Christmas, make sure I could buy presents, make sure I could keep the house warm, because it was very cold. That was it basically. (Grace, Age 31)

As we can see for Holly and Grace the 'natural process' of growing up did occasionally mean deviations into offending yet this did not always mean deviations from the pro-social identity which they had been individually cultivating as they matured. Matza's (1964) theory of 'drift' has salience here with the sporadic nature of offending seen in these women's narratives which appear chaotic at times. As Carlsson notes, 'drifts' or 'lulls' in offending are likely to occur due to the nature of the social world, full as it is with its complexity, coincidences and contingencies' (2012: 915).

For these women offending in earlier years was associated with a carefree attitude and a normalised behaviour related to what 'everyone else' was doing. Offending in youth also tended to involve drugs or alcohol. Whilst a relational experience in youth, drug use tended to be an isolating experience in older age for the women. We can note the links here to cultural criminology, for example Jack Katz' 1988 work on emotions and crime where offending is related to a buzz, where at the time there are no regrets and offending is exciting. In later years however this type of offending lost its appeal for the women and they began to consider alternative 'settled' lifestyles much like the desisting youth in Barry's (2006) study.

As these examples show, offending was not solely a 'natural' process which Holly and Grace 'grew out of'. Overall, offending was generally a 'transitory phenomenon' (McIvor et al., 2000) for the women. Yet desistance was not a process which happened (or was happening) 'naturally'.

Desistance, on the contrary, required both the 'will and the ways' to stop. For Holly, desistance means 'settling down' with her partner and regaining custody of their daughter. Grace's desistance narrative meanwhile focuses on her relationship with her best friend and gaining education and employment. Whilst self-control gained through the aging process has a role here, it is not the sole desistance-promoting factor.

Late onset offending

The beginnings of offending occurred at different points for the women studied. Whilst Marie's quote introduces us to this article, it must be noted that Marie was 40 at the time of our interview, certainly out of the peak of the age-crime curve found within traditional criminology. Marie herself recognises that her offending trajectory was the opposite to what a researcher might usually expect.

UB: We're going to talk about your background, community, family and school and so on. So what were you like as a child?

Marie: Um... Better behaved than I am now (laughs). I were basically, I were quite a good child really...

UB: And do you remember what you were like at school?

M: I were a bit of a bugger but I weren't really bad. I wasn't as bad then as I was now, I seem to have gotten worse as I've got older. (Marie, Age 40)

Although Marie mentions a shoplifting incident when she was 10 or 11, she describes the incident as a one-off and a 'giggle thing', not something she was regularly involved with. Marie spoke in great

detail about her background and employment history to highlight that the change in her behaviour did not actually mean a change in her identity as an essentially good and caring person.

I mean I were a nurse, I were in St John Ambulance when I were a kid. Ten year I used to teach first aid, I've got a qualification, A B.Tech national diploma in science, I've got all qualifications in things. And then I got pregnant, I had Jo, I couldn't go back to nursing. And I'll tell you how I started offending. I lived on a building site, this building site and they were building round me. And this lad said to me, "oh that's that Kingspan there" you know, insulation? It were like insulation for like walls. He said, "If you get me some of that I'll give you like fifteen quid a pack." So I started half inching it didn't i? Right. So I were making a fortune of it (laughs). And I started going all over, started going on other work sites and that. Anyway, I didn't really got caught doing any of that. And then I started hiring tools, it just got... it grew should I say. It's just... not greedy; I'm not a greedy person. I've had money and then lost it... I used to have money... I used to make £1000 a week cash and that were legit money, I had my own pub and hotel so... But I went from that, then everything went tits up and then I just started basically doing it 'cause I were skint... It's been like possibly, over the last ten years really that I've been in bother. It's not really, I'm not a naughty, naughty girl, I wouldn't go and burgle someone or owt like that, I've got an heart do you know what I mean? One of them, it's I'm stubborn and I'd rather go out and dig some flags up from an old farm that's disused than ask me mum for money do you know what I mean? (Marie, Age 40)

Marie is quick to note that she is not a "greedy person" or a "naughty girl" but that offending in later life was related to both poverty and chance. Marie's partner, Claire claims that Marie has "ODD" or Oppositional Defiance Disorder which explains Marie's late onset offending. In my field notes, I note that Marie was probably in the 'primary desistance' (Maruna and Farrall, 2004) phase of her offending trajectory. As part of her sentence Marie is banned from driving and she is proud when

relating that she has not driven “yet”, the “yet” here suggestive of her possible actions in the future. She relates stealing stone flags to a “buzz” as well as a needed income stream, much like the early cultural offending of Holly and Grace. Marie speaks about her offending in the present tense. Marie’s trajectory does not follow a maturational course as desistance has not happened naturally or without the influence of other factors (Glueck and Glueck, 1950). Whilst Marie recognises she must “grow up”, without the will and the ways to do so, desistance has not been forthcoming.

Similarly Rebecca notes that her offending has been confined to later life. Although in her early days Rebecca remembers being expelled from school, after a difficult childhood caring for her schizophrenic mother and dealing with her parent’s divorce, she quickly turned her life around whilst in a privileged school in Europe which she was able to attend thanks to her grandfather’s connections.

I went into secondary school; while I did all my school work, I was an A+ student, I still became a bully, that's what I became, I became a bully. So I was quite manipulative at a very you know... And then eventually that resulted in me being excluded or as it was called then expelled from school... So as soon as I'd been expelled from school I then was on a boat to Belgium and I was packed off to boarding school... And that was it; I went to boarding school... And they were all diplomats, very... you know quite wealthy children... I felt totally isolated for the first six months... So it took me about 6 months and then from then on in it was essentially the main kick up the bum... well I say that it put me on the right track until I was 42. So you know, and I did manage to get my head down. (Rebecca, Age 46)

From here Rebecca lived a fairly privileged life, working for international companies and travelling the world with her husband and two young children. However on the family’s return to England at

the age of 32, Rebecca began to develop an alcohol dependency which essentially led to her offences.

So from being 33 up until I was 42 was the real decline with alcohol. And you know my marriage broke down, my ex-husband then took the children, didn't bring them back, took them out of the country. I then went through probably as many courts as I could, hired solicitors, racked up huge legal fees, and ran away from it all. Moved to Austria, thought I'd go back to Europe, worked there, tried to get my life on track but the booze was, you know, it had now got a complete grip of me... So I just blew every penny I had, I was getting in a mess... And I then rang my father and sort of said, "Come and help"... I was just in a total mess. So he said, "Yeah." Came back to Easton, so I was 42. Came back to Easton, sort of you know quite broken. Moved in with my father and my step-mother who I'd had quite a difficult history with... Then what happened was my own bills caught up with me because they always do... I ended up committing credit card fraud in my step-mother's name. And she reported that to the police. I knew what I was doing; I knew it was wrong... I paid it off for a while so until my money ran out and then it all caught up with me. And you know I got found out, she reported me to the police and then obviously I went through the CJS.

(Rebecca, Age 46)

Following this conviction Rebecca signed a cheque for rent which bounced and was once again convicted of fraud and eventually became homeless. Unlike Marie however, Rebecca is certainly in the secondary desistance phase (Maruna and Farrall, 2004). Her generative work and cognitive shifts have led to desistance promotion, something which can clearly be seen with her work with her HfN Project.

So I then went back to my mother's and began researching, saved up enough to get my deposit, and moved into my own house... I spent a while thinking, "Well actually, looking around for other women who had written their own narratives, I couldn't really find very

much. And I thought, "Well there's a lot of men's stuff out there, there's not a lot of women's stuff." So... and then it sort of grew, I never really expected it to grow like it did...And I thought... "I've got to do something for women in the Criminal Justice System. I am going to do something. (Rebecca, Age 46)

For both Marie and Rebecca, acquisitive offending was partly a product of the conditions they found themselves in in later life. Carr and Stovall-Hanks (2012) found that women with late onset offending shared characteristics including frequent mention of loss, caretaking (both social and economic), and addiction as turning points or periods that contributed to their involvement in crime. For Marie, caretaking and for Rebecca, addiction and loss were also factors that contributed to the onset of offending. The authors also note that social bonds (Sampson and Laub, 1993; 2003) such as entering a new job or relationship are factors in the desistance of female late-onset offenders. The same can be said for Rebecca and Marie here. Desistance for both the women has not been something which happened naturally over time as they aged but has been an active and difficult process requiring relational support as well as individual agency.

One-off offending

A final trajectory was recognised in the narratives of the women who had carried out one-off offences and can be seen in Heather's and Katie's narratives. Both were charged with benefit fraud offences. Both of these women had little to no contact with the criminal justice system prior to their fraud offences. Offending here was not behaviour but an action.

It [the police and courts] were all new (Heather, Age 24)

I had quite a sheltered life really and didn't go out much. Mum and dad were quite strict, very strict. So I didn't go out much... here was some people that did offend. And there was lots of stealing going on from cloakroom pockets and things, because you used to leave your bags and coats in the cloakroom. So there were things like that but, no I didn't, I kept away, I

kept away from people like that, otherwise my parents wouldn't have liked it. If they didn't like somebody I couldn't speak to them so... (Katie, Age 60)

Particularly for Katie, the entry into the criminal justice system was something which was wholly unexpected and out of the ordinary. At the time of our interviews she did not see herself as an offender but maintained her pro-social identity which was connected to her childhood and upbringing.

If somebody had have sent me a letter, I wouldn't have ignored it, I've never been like that. I've always been brought up to you know, know right from wrong. My father, he would never claim benefit or anything. My mother wouldn't, they didn't believe in it you know, so I weren't brought up that way. (Katie, Age 60)

Nonetheless both Katie and Heather had lives which are unfortunately typical of females entering the criminal justice system. Both suffered from myriad mental health issues including self-harm and suicide attempts, Heather had a history of childhood abuse from her father and her alcoholic mother whilst Katie had physical health problems and relationship problems with her husband and daughters. For both women, their problems were exacerbated and multiplied with their entry into the criminal justice system. Minor offences by women are currently resulting in harsher responses across the western world (Sheehan et al, 2007; Barry and McIvor, 2008). Whilst neither Katie nor Heather can be considered persistent offenders, their lives share many of the conditions and disadvantages of females with convictions in general and their desistance narratives are therefore important. Neither Katie nor Heather's desistance occurred as part of a natural process but much like the other women previously mentioned required both support and agency.

Women who may be viewed as 'one-off' offenders or even offenders without intent, should not be eliminated from any consideration of desistance. Like the women who follow a 'traditional' trajectory of offending, or those who come to offending in later life, 'one-off' and non-intentional

offenders travel the same criminal justice pathway; they are arrested, put on trial, 'punished' or 'treated' accordingly. This pathway has an effect on their lives and identities. Often, as Katie and Heather's experiences show, their lives have been blighted by gendered or structural inequalities. Furthermore, they travel the same journeys of resilience and survival which often mirror their fellow 'offenders' desistance attempts.

Conclusion

Whilst many of the women studied decreased the concentration and level of their offending as they aged, others did not offend until later in life and for yet others offending was comparable to a blip in an otherwise law abiding narrative which was nonetheless marred by disadvantage. Whilst the maturational theory, which considers offending to be a behaviour that (most) individuals will 'grow out of' does have some salience in the experiences of the women affected by the criminal justice system who were part of this study, it is far from the only factor in explaining their desistance pathways. Attempts to 'go straight' such as those noted by Grace and Holly were challenged when the chaotic nature of the women's lives reached a particular level. For Marie, who is arguably most aware of the expectations placed on her to change, self-control has not been enough to prevent her from offending in later life. Neither was Rebecca prevented from offending by her maturity. For Katie and Heather, at either ends of the age spectrum of the women studied, maturity and self-control had nothing to do with their convictions. These were women punished by what Garland terms the 'crime control complex' (2001).

The notion that desistance is a 'natural process' effectively silences the narratives of resilience of women affected by the criminal justice system. Although many of the women interviewed as part of this study appear at first glance to follow the ontological perspective that offending is something which individuals essentially 'grow out of', this viewpoint ignores the conditions in which the offences and desistance journeys of women take place. To suggest that desistance is a natural

process for women is to ignore the poverty, domestic abuse, drug and mental health issues that invades both their offending and desistance.

[All names and places have been anonymised]

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