



*Edited by Calvin M. Langton and James R. Worling*

# *Facilitating Desistance from Aggression and Crime*

Theory, Research, and Strength-Based Practices

**WILEY** Blackwell

This is a very timely addition to the work that is now beginning to focus on more “positive” approaches to treating those who have committed various crimes. The editors have gathered some of the foremost thinkers in the current field relating to desistance, assessing strengths in individuals who have committed antisocial acts, and promoting protective factors in treatment. Hence this volume provides an excellent overview of the current situation in the field, as well as insights and pointers to where the desistance field is heading. As such it is an invaluable addition to the literature, and is a must buy for those working in, or who have an interest in, crime prevention.

**Anthony Beech, Emeritus Professor of Criminological Psychology,  
University of Birmingham, UK**

*Facilitating Desistance from Aggression and Crime: Theory, Research, and Strength-Based Practices* is the authoritative guide on all matters related to desistance. An impressive array of international experts skillfully synthesize and critique a range of theoretical, assessment, and treatment issues germane to desistance and strength-based paradigms. Operating through an evidence-based lens, *Facilitating Desistance* spans a multitude of settings and diverse populations. Students, practitioners, and seasoned scholars alike will benefit immensely from this book.

**Shelley Brown, Associate Professor, Department of Psychology,  
Carleton University, Canada**

Desistance from crime is among the most pressing criminological issues for criminal justice practitioners and policy-makers, but strangely is under the radar of many scholars. Until now. In their superlative edited volume, Calvin Langton and James Worling have assembled an international team of experts who present timely information on conceptual, assessment, and treatment issues that bear on the reduction of aggression, conduct problems, delinquency, sexual offending, and violent crime. Interdisciplinary, engaging, and balanced in its approach, *Facilitating Desistance from Aggression and Crime: Theory, Research, and Strength-Based Practices* is an indispensable resource for practitioners and academicians.

**Matt DeLisi, Distinguished Professor, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences,  
Dean's Professor, Coordinator of Criminal Justice Studies, Professor,  
Department of Sociology, Iowa State University, USA**

*Facilitating Desistance from Aggression and Crime: Theory, Research, and Strength-Based Practices* is an excellent book that should be read by all researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers who are interested in learning about explanations of desistance and methods of encouraging desistance. It is wide-ranging and well-researched, focusing especially (and commendably) on strength-based and protective factors. It includes extensive reviews of explanation and prediction as well as assessment and treatment methods for different types of offenders, including sex offenders and mentally disordered offenders.

**David P. Farrington, Emeritus Professor of Psychological Criminology,  
Cambridge University, UK**

With backgrounds ranging from social work to forensic psychiatry, the contributors to this remarkable volume bring desistance theory to the world of practice in a way no previous book has been able to achieve. A fantastic contribution to research-informed practice that should be widely read.

**Shadd Maruna, Professor of Criminology, Queen's University Belfast, UK**

“Desistance” and “strength-based approaches” have become catchcries in criminal justice but with little meaning or substance. *Facilitating Desistance from Aggression and Crime* promises to help catapult the field forward in an impactful way. The impressive array of authors systematically tackles the theory, research, and applications that add to our understanding of how people “stop crime” and how our practices and systems can support that. This volume should be mandatory reading for those who work with people who come into the criminal justice system, and those at risk for doing so.

**James R. P. Ogloff AM, Dean, School of Health Sciences, Swinburne University of Technology, Executive Director of Psychological Services and Research, Victorian Institute of Forensic Mental Health, Australia**

Desistance- and psychological treatment-based models for supporting people’s aspirations toward “post-crime” lives have been moving on parallel tracks for some time, aware of each other but connecting in only limited ways. This book is the most comprehensive effort to date to draw those tracks together, despite their distinct histories and underlying assumptions about human behavior. Day and Halsey’s opening chapter is stuffed full of excellent ideas for developing practice that will lead to better outcomes for the people we seek to help. From there on the book’s focus is broad, covering a range of theoretical foundations, populations, and types of offending. It finishes with a series of substantial chapters on treatment that will surely give program designers and practitioners support for new directions in the coming years, and provide plenty of lively debate between researchers, students, and academics.

**Devon Polaschek, Professor, Te Kura Whatu Oho Mauri School of Psychology, University of Waikato, New Zealand**

*Facilitating Desistance from Aggression and Crime: Theory, Research, and Strength-Based Practices* provides a full range of coverage for professionals interested in helping justice-involved clients reduce harmful behaviors and develop paths to meaningful lives. The contributors are many of the world’s leading experts on topics ranging from desistance models, assessment of protective factors, and strength-based approaches to treatment. A must read for anyone interested in alternatives to the cycle of recidivism prevalent in today’s criminal justice system.

**Raymond Chip Tafrate, Professor and Clinical Psychologist, Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Central Connecticut State University, USA**

This is a landmark book that sets out to integrate desistance theory and research with strength-based approaches in correctional and forensic practice. The authors are experts in their chapter topics and do a beautiful job of retaining the best aspects of risk-oriented practice with a greater focus on individuals with core values and aspirations. The scholarship is impeccable, the writing uniformly strong, and the proposals for the future of our field novel and exciting. This book provides a comprehensive roadmap for the future.

**Tony Ward, Professor of Forensic Clinical Psychology, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand**

# Facilitating Desistance from Aggression and Crime



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Theory, Research, and  
Strength-Based Practices

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*For Grace, Sylvia, and Christina – CML*

*For my friends and colleagues at the former Thistletown Regional Centre,  
SAFE-T Program – JRW*



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# Abbreviations

ACE	adverse childhood experience
ADHD	attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
AEI	Access Early Intervention
ART	aggression replacement training
ASEBA	Achenbach System of Empirically Based Assessment
ASPD	antisocial personality disorder
AUC	area under the curve
BAME	Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic
BASC	Behavior Assessment System for Children
BERS	Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scales
BEST	Bringing Evidence-Based Services and Treatment for Young Children and their Families
BIP	batter intervention program
B-SAFER	Brief Spousal Assault Form for the Evaluation of Risk
CARES	Coaching and Rewarding Emotional Skills
CBCL	Child Behavior Checklist
CBT	cognitive behavioral therapy
CD	conduct disorder
CDCP	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
CDI	Child-Directed Interaction
CFA	confirmatory factor analysis
CI	confidence interval
CLCO	Changing Lives and Changing Outcomes
CPP	Coping Power Program
CSC	Correctional Service of Canada
CSDD	Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development
CSS	Criminal Sentiments Scale
CTC	Communities that Care
CTS	Conflict Tactics Scales
CU	callous-unemotional
DA	Danger Assessment
D.A.R.E.	Drug Abuse Resistance Education
DASH-13	Desistance for Adolescents who Sexually Harm
DNI	Dynamic Need Index
DRAOR	Dynamic Risk Assessment for Offender Re-entry
DREEM	Developing Recovery Enhancement Environments Measure
DRI	Dynamic Risk Index

DUNDRUM	Quartet Dangerousness Understanding, Recovery and Urgency Manual
DVSI-[R]	Domestic Violence Screening Instrument [Revised]
EARL	Early Assessment Risk List
EPICS	Effective Practices in Community Supervision
ESTER	Evidence-Based Structured Assessment Instrument of Risk and Protective Factors
ETS	Enhanced Thinking Skills
FACHS	Family and Community Health Study
FAM	Female Additional Manual
FFT	Functional Family Therapy
FPJ	Final Protection Judgment
GAP	Gender and Aggression Project
GED	General Educational Development
GSI	Global Severity Index
GLM	Good Lives Model
GPCSL	General Personality and Cognitive Learning Model
GSE	General Self-Efficacy Scale
HARM	Hamilton Anatomy of Risk Management
HCR-20	Historical Clinical Risk Management-20
HCR-20 <sup>V3</sup>	Historical Clinical Risk Management-20 version 3
HEART	Holistic Enrichment for At-Risk Teens
HHDP	Rutgers Health and Human Development Project
ICC	intraclass correlation coefficient
IFRJ	Integrative Final Risk Judgment
IORNS	Inventory of Offender Risk, Needs, and Strengths
IPV	intimate partner violence
IY	Incredible Years
LOT-R	Life Orientation Test–Revised
LSI	Level of Service Inventory
LSI-OR	Level of Service Inventory–Ontario Revision
LSI-R	Level of Service Inventory–Revised
LS/CMI	Level of Service/Case Management Inventory
LS/RNR	Level of Service/Risk Need Responsivity
MDT	Mode Deactivation Therapy
MEGA	Multiplex Empirically Guided Inventory of Ecological Aggregates for Assessing Sexually Abusive Adolescents and Children
MI	Motivational Interview
MnSOST	Minnesota Sex Offender Screening Tool
MST	Multi Systemic Therapy
MTC	Modified Therapeutic Community
NT	narrative therapy
ODARA	Ontario Domestic Assault Risk Assessment
ODD	oppositional defiant disorder
OR	odds ratio

ORI	Overall Risk Index
PACT	Positive Achievement Change Tool
PCC-SR	Patient Staff Conflict Checklist–Shift Report
PCIT	Parent–Child Interaction Therapy
PCL:YV	Psychopathy Checklist: Youth Version
PCRA	Post Conviction Risk Assessment
PDI	Parent-Directed Interaction
PFS	Protective Factors Scale
PHDCN	Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods
PIC-R	Personal, Interpersonal, and Community Reinforcement
PICC	Problem Identification, Choices, and Consequences
PPS	Positive Psychological States
PRI	Protective Risk Index
PROFESOR	Protective + Risk Observations For Eliminating Sexual Offense Recidivism
PSI	Protective Strengths Index
PTSD	post-traumatic stress disorder
R&R	Reasoning and Rehabilitation
RNR	Risk-Need-Responsivity
RP	Relapse Prevention (model)
RSA	Recovery Self-Assessment
SAPROF	Structured Assessment of PROtective Factors for violence risk
SAPROF-CV	Structured Assessment of PROtective Factors for violence risk–Child Version
SAPROF-SO	Structured Assessment of PROtective Factors for violence risk–Sexual Offence version
SAPROF-YV	Structured Assessment of PROtective Factors for violence risk–Youth Version
SARA	Spousal Assault Risk Assessment
SAVRY	Structured Assessment of Violence Risk in Youth
SBA	strength-based approaches
SDM	social development model
SDQ	Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire
SDT	self determination theory
SEEDS	Skills for Effective Engagement, Development and Supervision
SEM	structural equation modeling
SFBT	solution-focused brief therapy
SFS	Salient Factor Score
SHS	State Hope Scale
SIR	Statistical Information on Recidivism
SOP	Sex Offender Program
SORM	Structured Outcome Assessment and Community Risk Monitoring
SoS	Signs of Safety
SOTIPS	Sex Offender Treatment Intervention and Progress Scale

SOTP	Sex Offender Treatment Program
SPIn	Service Planning Instrument
SPJ	structured professional judgment
SRI	Static Risk Index
START	Short-Term Assessment of Risk and Treatability
START:AV	Short-Term Assessment of Risk and Treatability: Adolescent Version
STICS	Strategic Training Initiative in Community Supervision
SVR-20	Sexual Violence Risk-20
TA	therapeutic alliance
TC	Therapeutic Community
TFCO	Treatment Foster Care Oregon
TIER	Trauma-Informed Effective Reinforcement System
TM	Tidal Model
VRAG	Violence Risk Appraisal Guide
VRAG-R	Violence Risk Appraisal Guide–Revised
VRS	Violence Risk Scale
VRS-SO	Violence Risk Scale–Sexual Offender
VRS-YV	Violence Risk Scale –Youth Version
WSJCA	Washington State Juvenile Court Assessment
YLS/CMJ	Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory



# Section 1

## Foundations



# Desistance Theory and Forensic Practice

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## Introduction

In this chapter we summarize some of the desistance literature that can help us to understand more about how, and why, people desist from crime. It is important to note from the outset that simply trying to explain how people actually “give up crime” rather than identifying those characteristics and propensities that place them at risk is likely to resonate strongly for those who are interested in more strength-focused approaches to forensic assessment and treatment. In addition, the key idea behind many contemporary desistance theories – that people can be assisted to achieve short-term psychological changes that, in turn, trigger longer-term behavioral changes which then become embedded in new personal identities – is fully consistent with the therapeutic aspirations of many allied health professionals who work in forensic settings. Accordingly, in this chapter we propose that desistance theories should not only be of great interest to those who are seeking to understand how, when, and why some people offend, but also of direct relevance to working in ways that can actually assist change to take place. There are, of course, also points of departure between the ways in which the desistance process has been understood and the assumptions that underpin a more treatment-oriented approach which we also consider. We start though by observing that one of the most important ideas contained in the desistance literature is the need to focus on “the *process* by which people come to cease and sustain cessation of offending behaviour” (Weaver, 2019, p. 642, emphasis added). We then outline what we see as some key elements of any desistance-informed approach.

Polaschek (2019) has observed that the desistance literature can be characterized as being made up of two strands: an empirical one that aims to identify and describe criminal career paths; and a more conceptual one that seeks to better understand the personal experience of desisting. Three broad perspectives dominate: the *ontogenic* perspective places age and maturation at the forefront of inquiry and posits that most

people will age naturally out of criminal behavior; the *social bonds* perspective contends that it is the rewards from, and connections to, legitimate groups that ensure an appropriate level of social integration (and thereby protect against the motivation and opportunity to engage in crime); and the *narratological* perspective examines the coherence of one's self-project including the "strategies for creating meaning" (Maruna, 2001, p. 27) within one's life as key to desistance from crime. Some of the main ideas contained in each of these approaches are summarized in Table 1.1, although we would note that any attempt to delineate the work of desistance theories in this way is likely to be somewhat artificial given that there is so much common ground. Nonetheless, we have included Table 1.1 in this chapter to offer some reference points for those who are seeking to understand the meaning of the term "desistance" and how it has been used in different ways, at different times, by different people.

In reality, all three of the perspectives referred to in Table 1.1 will hold relative weight in the lives of all (ex)offenders (McNeill, 2006). As noted previously, they each conceptualize desistance as a process that is not measurable or detectable as a discrete event (as commencing at one particular moment) and is not achieved solely through the strength of an individual's will or, indeed, through the array of social supports that might be available. Instead, desistance is best understood as a complex process that builds through time and where the drivers of sustained cessation are typically only

**Table 1.1** Key approaches to understanding desistance (Based on Polaschek, 2019).

<i>Perspective</i>	<i>Focus of work</i>	<i>Key researchers</i>	<i>Contributions</i>
Ontogenic	Criminal career paths	Farrington Moffitt Piquero	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Age is a robust predictor of criminal behavior ("aging out of crime").</li> <li>● Life course persistent versus adolescent limited offending.</li> <li>● Intermittency (gaps between offenses – "slowing down" and "accelerating").</li> </ul>
Social bonds	Informal social control	Sampson and Laub	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● "Turning points" (life events) that can lead to desistance.</li> <li>● Social connectedness as a key influence.</li> </ul>
	Cognitive transformation	Giordano	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Psychological drivers of desistance (openness to change, recognizing possibilities for change, imagining a new identity, no longer valuing an old identity).</li> <li>● "Hooks for change."</li> </ul>
Narratological	Narrative identity	Maruna Bushway and Paternoster McNeill Weaver	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Redemption from crime.</li> <li>● Giving back to the community (generativity).</li> <li>● Re-envisioning the past self.</li> <li>● The "feared self."</li> <li>● Primary, secondary, and tertiary desistance.</li> </ul>

identifiable in a posteriori fashion (i.e., after the event). This immediately draws attention to the limitations of those approaches that rely only on re-arrest or reconviction data to arrive at judgments about change. In fact such data can only provide an indirect indicator of desistance and, as Polaschek has argued, the processes and timing of self-reported desistance and official desistance are likely to be quite different. Furthermore, reoffending data have been used in different ways by researchers, some of whom rely on absolute measures (i.e., no reconvictions or charges), while others seek to measure a decrease in the rate, diversity, and seriousness of offending – all of which can warrant the label of desistance (e.g., Laub & Sampson, 2001).

In this chapter we focus on narratological conceptualizations of desistance as we believe that it is this body of work that has the most direct application to actual practice. The large criminological cohort studies of desistance – while clearly important to the development of public policy (see, for example, Bersani & Doherty, 2018) – tend to lack the detailed insights that are essential for working effectively at the individual level.

### Key Elements of a Desistance-focused Approach

One of the most important conclusions to emerge from the desistance literature is that there is no set pathway to success; desistance cannot simply be reduced to receiving a particular type of program, regardless of the mode of delivery or the length of exposure (e.g., Farrall & Calverley, 2006; Halsey & Deegan, 2016; McNeill & Weaver, 2010; Serin & Lloyd, 2009; Weaver, 2019). Nonetheless there are several elements that do seem to be common to successful desistance journeys (see McNeill, 2006, 2016; Shapland et al., 2016) and these can be usefully divided into what have been termed “primary,” “secondary,” and “tertiary” dimensions. In an ideal scenario, these will all work in concert to “produce” a non- or an ex-offender, or, more preferably, a person who we might describe as a conventional citizen.

*Primary desistance* is probably the least complicated of the three dimensions as it denotes the physical cessation of crime. On that count – and excepting the perpetration of new offenses whilst incarcerated (such as assaulting another prisoner) – prisons necessarily impose a break in the offending trajectories of even the most prolific offenders. But an imposed break in offending – whether as a result of imprisonment, serious illness, too much “heat” from police, or even the (temporarily) persuasive words of a respected peer or family member to change one’s ways – is not sufficient for desistance (in the fuller meaning of the term) to occur. No-one would say, for example, that someone in their mid-thirties serving their fourth sentence for armed robbery has truly desisted from crime (since, in fact, only the opportunity – not necessarily the motivation – for such offending has been removed). Instead, desistance requires something more than the short or more prolonged absence of an event. This is perhaps why incapacitation alone is so often ineffectual in deterring prisoners from resuming a criminal lifestyle on release. Something beyond the cessation of crime needs to occur for desistance to endure.

*Secondary desistance*, therefore, is a concept that speaks to the changes in self-orientation that some offenders experience either within or beyond prison which can then help turn a (forced) lull or crime-free gap in offending into something enduring and actively accomplished. Maruna et al. (2004) describe secondary desistance as “the movement from the behaviour of non-offending to the assumption of

the role or identity of a changed person” (p. 19). This process of delabeling (e.g., “I no longer think of myself as an offender”) and relabeling (e.g., “I think of myself as a good father or trusted worker”) is viewed as an essential part of building a credible sense of self-worth. As McNeill and Schinkel (2016) remind us, “‘spoiled identities’ need to be shed if change is to be secured” (p. 608).

Giordano et al. (2002) have provided an extensive overview of what they identify as the main psychological elements of secondary desistance. These include an “openness to change,” the existence of “hooks for change” (e.g., the prospect of gaining employment) and the meanings ascribed to those hooks (e.g., employment is viewed positively as helping to build new relationships rather than negatively as severing ties with old peers), the fashioning of a “replacement self” based around legitimate pursuits, and the cognitive re-conceptualization of criminal behavior as no longer positive, viable, or personally relevant. Secondary desistance – as with desistance more generally – is conceptualized as a fraught and fragile process prone to all kinds of setbacks (minor breaches, new but less serious offenses) and, more ominously, “fuck it” moments where all progress seems to disappear in an instant (as, for example, when someone “snaps” and engages in a crime spree) (Halsey et al., 2017). This fragility, though, brings to the fore the importance of the concept of *tertiary desistance*.

It is only really in recent years that scholars such as Weaver (2019) and McNeill and Schinkel (2016) have turned their attention to the importance of factors beyond (but connected to) the individual that bear heavily on the success or otherwise of the desistance process. Put simply, for desistance to be resilient to external threats and for it to endure across many years, the efforts and progress of those embarking on desistance must be reflected by esteemed others and certified/validated in official and informal fashion (for an excellent discussion of reintegration rituals and the processes used to “reverse” the stigma of being an offender, see Maruna, 2011). This is what is often referred to as tertiary desistance. As McNeill and Schinkel (2016) observe:

We suspect it may also make sense to develop the concept of tertiary desistance – referring not just to shifts in behaviour or identity but to shifts in one’s sense of belonging to a (moral) community. Our argument, based on developing research evidence, is that since identity is socially constructed and negotiated, securing long-term change depends not just on how one sees oneself but also on how one is seen by others, and on how one sees one’s place in society. Putting it more simply, desistance is a social and political process as much as a personal one. (p. 608, references removed).

A key idea in all of this work is that the primary, secondary, and tertiary dimensions of desistance are not sequential, although they can sometimes occur in more or less successive fashion. This non-sequential aspect partly explains why desistance stands as a multilayered process and resists reduction to predictive modeling about the probability of cessation. To avoid confusion, Nugent and Schinkel (2016) have deployed slightly different terminology for the primary, secondary, and tertiary components of desistance. Specifically, they “propose using the terms ‘act-desistance’ for non-offending, ‘identity desistance’ for the internalization of a non-offending identity, and ‘relational desistance’ for recognition of change by others” (p. 570). Bottoms (2013) also talks of the distinction between “diachronic” and “synchronic” desistance – about techniques for avoiding criminogenic situations ahead of time and for removing oneself from a criminogenic situation should it arise.

A further and final point to make about desistance is that long-term desisters tend to convey a redemptive outlook. In his landmark study, Maruna (2001) found that the ability to recount one's life story in a coherent narrative structure based around hope and redemption was a prominent element in desisters' lives. By contrast, those who persisted in offending spoke about their lives in fatalistic terms and narrated their lives and futures along the lines of a resignation script. The former group, in short, found a way to make sense of a previously wasted and destructive life while the latter struggled, failed, or simply did not see the point in doing so. Hope – defined as “an individual's overall perception that personal goals can be achieved” (Burnett & Maruna, 2004, p. 395) – has been found to be a reasonably good predictor of success after release (Woldgabreal et al., 2017). Similarly, generativity – the practice of caring about one's own legacy and its impact on the next generation – has also been linked to a redemptive outlook. Specifically, the process of “giving back” can enable prisoners or those on community-based orders to do good (for others) and, more importantly, to be seen to be doing good. In such instances, the rising stocks of personal and social legitimacy provide, in reflexive fashion, further reason to stay on the desistance path. In this way, what has been called “retroflexive reformation” – the process of strengthening one's own commitment to desistance through helping others to desist (or helping others generally) – can be a powerful means for igniting and sustaining desistance (Maruna et al., 2004). Again, how criminal justice agencies and those who work for them might more purposively support generativity and the emergence of redemptive scripts is an important issue for further consideration (Halsey & Deegan, 2016).

### **Making the Desistance Approach Explicit in Models of Behavioral Change**

For many allied health professionals involved with the delivery of clinical and rehabilitative services and programs, these accounts of the processes that underpin desistance will resonate with their clinical understanding of how behavioral change occurs. The underlying model of change that has been used to guide much of this work is the Transtheoretical Model (see Casey et al., 2005, for a review), an integrative, biopsychosocial model that aims to explain the processes through which intentional behavior change occurs. In relation to the question of how change occurs (rather than when change occurs), the most important ideas are not, as widely believed, related to the concept of progression through stages (i.e., that change is seldom a sudden event but typically involves a prescribed chain of events where the individual experiences a growing awareness of the problem, formulates a decision to do something differently, develops change strategies while in a transitional phase, and, finally, implements those strategies), but is a function of effects of three different factors:

- Processes of change – which refer to what an individual does to bring about change in emotion, behavior, cognitions, or relationships;
- Decisional balance – the relative assessment of the benefits (pros) and costs (cons) of changing a specific behavior; and
- Self-efficacy – usually assessed as confidence and temptations to describe an individual's perceived ability on a given task.