Desistance from Sexual Offending: Resilience, Recovery, and Risk

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Although it is growing, the body of literature on desistance from sexual offending remains small (Farmer, Beech, & Ward, 2011; Laws & Ward, 2011). This is likely due to the persistent emphasis placed on risk and recidivism by the related fields of offender management and research (Harris, 2014; Willis, Levenson, & Ward, 2010). It is undeniable that the majority of sex offenders, like the majority of general criminals, eventually stop engaging in these behaviors (Laws & Ward, 2011). What does distinguish these groups, is the way they are managed upon release.

This symposium will highlight the emerging literature on desistance from and de-escalation in sexual offending in three ways. The first speaker will present a model of cognitive behavioral change and desistance that was generated from more than 70 life history interviews conducted with men convicted of serious sexual offenses, incarcerated, and released. The second presentation will examine the social dimension of offending and the importance of peer influences on the process of community re-entry for a large sample of 164 convicted sex offenders. The final presenter will explore the impact of extant public policy on the process of desistance from sexual offending, paying particular attention to identity and the role that social exclusion plays in community re-entry. Narratives of risk versus redemption are explored and suggestions for future research and implications for policy are discussed.

A Model of Cognitive Behavioral Change and Desistance from Sexual Offending

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So far, extant theories of criminal desistance fail to fully account for the observed continuity and change in sexual offending across the life course (Giordano, et al., 2002; Harris, 2014; Maruna, 2001; Sampson & Laub, 1993). This paper introduces a five step theoretical model of behavioral change and desistance from sexual offending. The model
integrates prevailing psychological and criminological research including: Giordano, et al.’s (2002) theory of cognitive transformation; Maruna’s (2001) theory of identity change and redemption; Sampson and Laub’s (1993) age graded theory of informal social control, and Gottfredson and Hirschi’s (1990) perspectives on natural desistance and the age crime curve. The model was developed using the life histories and desistance narratives of over 70 men convicted of sexual offenses, incarcerated, and released. The model describes the process of cognitive change using literature on recovery and treatment but also details the behavioral change that is achieved in the absence of any discernable cognitive transformation. The model details five distinct stages from active offending to transitional reentry, gains made in treatment, termination, and maintenance of desistance. Practical implications of this model, suggested avenues for future research, and recommendations for precipitating positive change and desistance are also discussed.

Goals of the Paper:
1. Expose the audience to desistance literature and emphasize the overlap between criminology and psychology.
2. Present a comprehensive theoretical model that accounts for continuity and change in sexual offending across the life course.
3. Explore the utility of this model for practitioners as well as researchers, and offenders themselves.

The Path of Desistance from Offending in Adult Sex Offenders: Community Re-Entry and Peer Influences

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The social dimension of offending has typically been examined with individuals involved in utilitarian, market-type and violent offenses. It has been a neglected dimension of the study of sex offenders given the portrayal of sex crimes committed by adults as solo-type offenses. The risk-based model of correctional psychology emphasizes the importance of assessing and intervening on dynamic risk factors to reduce the risk of recidivism, such as the presence of antisocial peers. The life course approach, however, stresses the importance of turning points, life events that can facilitate community reintegration which in turn may result in desistance from crime, such as the presence of prosocial influences. The current study revisits these two approaches in the context of the community re-entry of adult sex offenders. More specifically, using prospective longitudinal data from a sample
of convicted sex offenders (n=164), composed mainly of moderate and high-risk offenders, the study examines the role and impact of the quality and quantity of the peer network on recidivism upon community re-entry. Survival analyses were conducted taking into account for the overall risk level of sexual recidivism. Upon community re-entry, results show that adult sex offenders have a limited peer network and it is mainly composed of positive as opposed to negative social influences. Also, the findings indicate that a negative social network is a significant barrier to desistance from offending, for all forms of recidivism irrespective of individual characteristics. Finally, results suggest that, for this sample and at least in the short-term, the presence of positive social influences is not a sufficient condition to help an offender overcome life-long difficulties. Results are discussed in light of the scientific literature on community re-entry and recidivism in adult sex offenders. The role of social support and peer network is discussed in terms of its impact on desistance from offending in adult sex offenders.

Goals of the Paper:
1. To provide conference participants with findings related to peer network and desistance from offending in adult sex offenders upon community re-entry.
2. To provide findings related to the protective role of positive social influences upon community re-entry.
3. To provide quantitative data related to sex offender desistance from crime and the impact of the peer network.

Have We Gone Too Far? The Impact of Current Public Policy on the Identity of Men Convicted of Sexual Offenses

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A plethora of offender-specific policies now governs the way sex offenders move through the community upon release, and those policies have important consequences on offenders’ identity. This presentation examines the narratives of identity and risk found in the life histories and post-release experiences of more than 70 men convicted of sexual offenses and subsequently released.

As released sex offenders, participants reported having lost their previous identities as fathers, husbands, workers, friends, and members of the community. Often, once they return to the community, the only identity available to them is as a sex offender ever at risk of relapse and recidivism. Common emergent themes of a commitment to desistance, a desire for redemption, gains made during treatment, and struggles of reentry are described and discussed in combination with the inescapable stigma of being a sex offender in
society. We discuss the impact of the extensive treatment programs that participants are mandated to attend (while in many cases, living offense-free lives for extended periods of time) on their identity. The implications of the development of a "narrative of risk" for participants’ views of society as well as for their role within the community are also considered.

Goals of the Paper:
1. Present identity narratives found in participants’ life interviews.
2. Review participants’ views about society in link with their identity as sexual offenders and their role in the community.
3. Discuss the policy implications of participants’ identity narratives focused on risk.