

SHAPING THE FUTURE

2019 ATSA Conference | Thursday November 7 | 3:30 PM – 5:00 PM

T-41

CoSA & Community Re-Integration

Identity Transformation and Desistance Among People Who Have Sexually Offended: The Role of CoSA

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Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) are groups of trained, community-based volunteers who provide support to individuals convicted of sexual offences in the post-prison context. CoSA aim to both support offenders (known as 'core members') to reintegrate into the community, and to reduce sexual victimisation and foster community safety. While CoSA have typically been framed as a prisoner reintegration measure, recent scholarship (eg Fox 2015) argues that they are better understood as desistance-promotion. Fox (2015) argues that in CoSA, ordinary members of the community play a key role in advancing desistance by enabling their integration into community life.

The study on which this paper is based took this broad argument as a starting point. It examined in more finely-grained detail whether and how the narratives of core members reflect commonly-documented shifts in the identities of desisters (such as the 'professional ex', redemption scripts, generativity (Maruna 2001)). To interrogate this question, 66 semi-structured qualitative interviews were undertaken with CoSA core members (n = 31), volunteers, staff and stakeholders from six CoSA programs in California and Canada. Overall, findings support Fox's (2015) contention that using a desistance lens to understand CoSA would be beneficial. Rather than merely using CoSA for pragmatic ends, such as support with reentry, the study found that CoSA provide core members with opportunities to test out new selves (or new versions of selves). Crucially, they also provide audiences to these new, non-offending identities. The paper will thus be of value to those working in CoSA or with similar programs. It also advances Maruna's (2001) conceptual framework for understanding desistance by applying this framework to people who have sexually offended, a key gap in current desistance literature.

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Learning Goals:

- Propose a revised conceptual framework for understanding the role of CoSA in the desistance trajectories of people who have sexually offended;
- Provide recommendations about how this new understanding can and should shape the delivery of CoSA programs; and
- Advance existing understandings of desistance from crime by discussing empirical research related to an understudied population (ie, those who have offended sexually).

Dr Kelly Richards is a Senior Lecturer in Queensland University of Technology's Faculty of Law, School of Justice. She completed a PhD on restorative justice at Western Sydney University in 2007 and in 2010 was awarded the ACT Government Office for Women Audrey Fagan Churchill Fellowship to study Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) in Canada, the USA and the UK. Her recent research, funded by Australia's National Organisation for Women's Safety (with Dr Jodi Death, Queensland University of Technology, and Professor Kieran McCartan, University of the West of England) includes the first study into CoSA in Australia. This research also examines the role of cultural mentoring support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander offenders released under Queensland's *Dangerous Prisoners (Sexual Offenders) Act* as well as the views of victim/survivors of sexual violence on sex offender reintegration broadly and on CoSA specifically. Dr Richards has also undertaken research on public opinion about CoSA and the causes of child sexual abuse and global media coverage of CoSA.

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'The Core Member Has Been Open and Honest from Day One and Also Accountable for His Actions': A Qualitative Analysis of Success and Failure in CoSA

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Nicolas Blagden, PhD
Rebecca Lievesley, MSc
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Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) is a construct in which volunteer members of the community come together to support an individual with prior convictions of sexual offences upon their release from prison. Previously, CoSA has been subject to criticism in terms of over-reporting and promotion of positive results (Elliott, 2014) although recent research indicates that CoSA reduces the risk of sexual recidivism by 88% (Duwe, 2018). It has been argued that CoSA effectiveness can only be evaluated through the inclusion of CoSA non-completers (Clarke, Brown & Völlm, 2015) and that future research should consider failed CoSA start-ups to improve practices, (Duwe, 2018). The present research addresses this gap by exploring both CoSA with successful outcomes and those which are less successful and end with adverse outcomes.

This research sought to understand the experiences of Core Members (CM) in CoSA and those that support them through a qualitative analysis of End of Circle Reports (EOCR). The EOCR tracks the achievements and challenges from beginning through to CoSA completion. The EOCR contains much qualitative data relating to the Core Members progress including relationships within the CoSA, Core Members wellbeing, dynamic risk and significant life events. This paper presents the qualitative analysis of a selection of EOCR split into successful and adverse outcomes. n=50 EOCR were obtained from Circles UK and data were analysed using thematic analysis. The analysis outlines a number of themes including improvements in Core Members wellbeing, the importance of open and honest discussions in CoSA relationships, challenges around volunteer commitment and concerns around paranoia and dishonesty. Implications of this analysis are discussed with reference to protective and risk factors, the identification of red flag indicators and the importance of suitable volunteer selection.

Learning Goals:

- To identify factors that lead to adverse outcomes in CoSA.
- To understand why some Circles fail whilst other succeed.
- To learn how effective CoSA is, in promoting Core Member reintegration.

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Michelle Dwerryhouse is a third year PhD student at Nottingham Trent University. She completed her undergraduate degree in Psychology at the Open University and volunteered with Circles of Support and Accountability whilst completing her Msc in Forensic Psychology and Mental Health at the University of Manchester. Upon completion of her Msc she identified an opportunity for further research on Circles at NTU and began her PhD. She is currently working with the Safer Living Foundation to carry out a National Evaluation of Circles of Support and Accountability. Her research interests include offender rehabilitation and reintegration.

Dr Belinda Winder is a Professor in Forensic Psychology and Heads the Sexual Offences, Crime and Misconduct Research Unit (SOCAMRU) in the Department of Psychology at Nottingham Trent University. She set SOCAMRU up in 2007 to build upon the collaborative relationship between ongoing research within the Department of Psychology at NTU and HMP Whatton (one of the largest prisons in Europe, holding approximately 830 convicted adult men who have been convicted of a sexual offence). The unit's primary aim is to conduct and facilitate applied research in the area of sexual offending and sexual crime. The unit works with the HMPPS, Ministry of Justice and the NHS and conducts research at a number of prisons (including HMP Whatton and HMP Stafford) and other secure forensic establishments. She has disseminated her work in a range of ways (presentations, professional reports, peer reviewed papers, articles for prisoners' newspapers, medical journals and so on) both internationally and nationally. Belinda specialises in mixed-method research with a strong service-user voice and an applied focus. Belinda is a co-founder, trustee, Vice Chair and Head of Research and Evaluation for the Safer Living Foundation, a charity set up in 2014 to conduct (and evaluate) initiatives that help to prevent further victims of sexual crime.

Dr Nicholas Blagden is the Associate Head Sexual Offences, Crime and Misconduct Research Unit (SOCAMRU), Associate Professor and Senior Lecturer in Forensic Psychology at Nottingham Trent University. He is a Chartered Psychologist and has worked and researched within the criminal justice system and HM Prison Service for many years. He has taught undergraduate and postgraduate courses in psychology, forensic psychology and criminology. He has also trained police officers. His work has been funded by the HMPPS and he is currently engaged in numerous collaborative forensic projects with NTU, HMPPS, Institute for Mental Health, Ontario, Canada and Correctional Services Australia. He has published widely in international journals and disseminated research at international conferences.

Rebecca Lievesley is a Lecturer in Forensic Psychology and member of the Sexual Offences, Crime and Misconduct Research Unit at Nottingham Trent University. She has worked and researched within the Criminal Justice System for around 10 years, currently engaged in various research projects including an investigation of reoffending and desistance in those serving short sentences, an evaluation of anti-libidinal medication for individuals convicted of a sexual offence and help seeking prior to committing a sexual offence. Rebecca is also a co-founder and trustee of the Safer Living Foundation, a charity established to reduce sexual (re)offending through rehabilitative initiatives and prevent further victims of sexual crime.