

Understanding and promoting desistance from crime: A decision-theoretical approach

In this article desistance from crime is approached from a decision-theoretical view. The movement away from crime is conceptualised as a pathway with subsequent stages. To be successful in moving along these stages offenders need explicit strategies for action, i.e. strategies for behaviour the individual is aware of. These involve decisional choices aimed at redefining situations and at attempts to overcome or over-ride automatic implicit mental processes with harmful or antisocial consequences. Desistance is situated in the interplay between these implicit and explicit strategies for action. It is suggested that desistance involves the use of a proactive capability of setting higher level approach goals including moral beliefs of the offender about the social acceptability of his offending behaviour. Goal-seeking behaviour and moral beliefs of the offender about his criminal activity are included as intervening variables in an integrated and theory-based research model predicting desistance. After empirical validation of this framework, goal-seeking (or goal-setting) behaviour and moral beliefs of the offender appear as significant predictors for desistance as measured by subjective accounts of offenders, self-report and official data. Implications for intervention practice are discussed.

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Desistance, or the voluntary termination or reduction of offending over the life course, has become a key facet of the emerging subfield of life-course criminology. In addition, several researchers have explored the potential application of natural desistance to rehabilitation programs (Maruna, 2001; Farrall, 2002; McNeill & Whyte, 2007). Still, attempts at integrating intervention programs with natural processes of withdrawal from criminal careers remain scarce (Rumgay, 2004). Understanding the factors and the conditions that are associated with the process of desistance may be very useful for focusing the activities of interventions more effectively towards activating, accelerating and consolidating the process of desistance (Piquero, 2004).

To support the desistance process of individual offenders, especially of those involved with the criminal justice system, two things need to be sorted out. First, a meaningful definition of desistance with useful measures is needed. Second, a theory-based

integrated framework is needed that specifies factors supportive for desistance and explains *why, how and for whom* these factors are supportive.

As to the *first* task of defining desistance an important assumption is that offenders involved in the criminal justice system have incident events that may be part of a long-term development of reduced involvement in crime. Reduced involvement is manifested either in longer periods of abstinence from criminal activity (changes in intermittency) and/or by a (gradual) reduction in the frequency and seriousness of criminal activity. These patterns of decreased involvement in crime could be interpreted as indicators of the emergence of a natural desistance process especially when they involve a movement towards the role or identity of a changed person (Shover, 1985; Maruna, 2001; Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002).

Of special interest is desistance defined as a movement away from crime including a cognitive

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transformation and the gradual assumption of the role of a changed person. In this study the movement away from crime is operationalised as reductions in the offence rate measured by subjective accounts, self-report or official measures of desistance (Massoglia & Uggen, 2007). The usefulness of these measures will be explored in the light of their relationship with (causal) factors that prior research has linked to desistance involving a development of personal reform.

As to the *second* task of specifying factors supportive for desistance and explaining *why, how and for whom* these factors are supportive, this article introduces a decision-theoretical approach of desistance with a special focus on the role of goal-seeking behaviour and moral beliefs of the offender about the social acceptability of his offending behaviour. Alongside other concepts related to desistance, goal-seeking behaviour and moral beliefs about offending will be integrated in a research model. In this article the question for whom certain factors are supportive is also answered.

From a theoretical point of view desistance may be conceptualised as a decisional process with various (cognitive) stages. The first stage involves a change in the affective component of criminal activity. The second stage implies the move from motivational ambivalence to intentions to desist. The next stage is to transform intentions into action towards and maintenance of newly acquired behaviours. To be successful in moving along these stages it is suggested that offenders need explicit behavioural strategies of the conscious system. These strategies for action are aimed at redefining situations and at attempts to overcome or over-ride automatic implicit mental processes with harmful or antisocial consequences. Human behaviour is initiated and regulated by these implicit and explicit strategies for action. A strategy is a determination of and *choice* between alternative actions that an individual usually takes in certain situations. An implicit (or automatic, visceral, first-order) strategy is a strategy one is not aware of; an explicit strategy is a strategy that one is aware of (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995).

In this paper desistance is approached as an *explicit* strategy for behaviour with: (a) enhanced consciousness of the individual of a conflict between criminogenic implicit, automatic behavioural processes and more important personally endorsed higher level goals, (b) a decision to act in accordance with these higher level goals and (c) proactive capabilities including decisions to exert *willpower* in order to subordinate viscerally motivated behavioural responses to higher level goals, especially during stages of action and maintenance of altered behaviours. In the next section this decision – theoretical approach of desistance – will be described.

Literature review

Desistance and changes in the affective component of criminal involvement

Previous research literature indicates that desistance processes start with the experience of criminal activity as less attractive or aversive (Rumgay, 2004). This change in the affective component of criminal involvement may be caused by various experiences of the individual.

Crime may become less attractive by the experience of finding new interests or pro-social attainments (a partner, a child, a good job, a new vocation) that are important to the individual, i.e. become a *valued* reality. In this situation there is something to lose and to be guarded. Valued, new attainments may over-ride any interest in or need for crime.

Events and/or experiences within the legal system (repeated imprisonment) or the criminal world (the stress of the criminal lifestyle) may also play an important role. The accumulation of the legal, social, personal and moral costs of continued offending and incarceration can *deter* offenders and trigger a *change in criminal calculus*, i.e. a changed appraisal of the relative costs and benefits of criminal activity including repeated incarceration (Piquero, 2004).

Crime may also become less attractive by the maturing into adulthood and an increased cognitive capacity to assess the long-term negative consequences of continued offending or incarceration. In addition, psychosocially more mature offenders may experience a growing need to make sense of their lives as they may notice time and opportunities running out for them. These developmental changes can trigger a more negative stance toward criminal involvement and an increased attractiveness of a conventional lifestyle (Shover, 1985).

The role of motivational ambivalence

Increased attractiveness of a conventional lifestyle may result in contemplating desistance and the possibility of personal reform. Nevertheless, offenders may remain uncertain about the possibility of reoffending (Burnett, 2004). The path to desistance is therefore one of motivational *ambivalence* and conflict. Motivational ambivalence or the contemplation stage of motivational development (Prochaska & Di Clemente, 1984) is an abiding or recurring experience during the criminal career of most offenders. It involves a state of motivational conflict and it resembles the push and pull mechanisms of addictive habits. It arises from simultaneous desires to act in two opposing ways. Ambivalence is reflected in movements from crime to non-crime and back again. The zigzag path

towards desistance (Piquero, 2004) with its reversals of decision and indecision, compromise and lapses (Burnett, 2004) is one result of this ambivalence.

Ambivalence is generally triggered by the experience of criminal activity as less attractive or aversive. Ambivalence and uncertainty about the possibility of reoffending may develop into rationalisations or cognitive scripts (with standing decisions and rules of thumb) supportive of either persistence or desistance. These cognitive scripts may enhance or minimise the need for careful forethought and evaluative self-reflection (Burnett, 2004).

Burnett's study shows that there may be a large discrepancy between the wish to exit from crime and the transformation of this intention into tangible changes over a sustained period of time. In order to reach lasting change the individual must be able to *capitalise* on the experience of criminal activity as less attractive or aversive. Desistance may be seen as a process of capitalising *on an attitudinal shift* which involves *decisional choices* and the activation of the ability to carry through with these choices.

Moving beyond ambivalence

For desistance to occur it is important that offenders move beyond the contemplative stage of ambivalence. This means that the contemplation of desistance evolves from a mere wish or desire to stop offending into a *will* to stop offending. This step implies an *increased cognitive orientation* towards desistance, expressed as an explicit decisional choice or *intention* to stop offending. This intention to stop offending may be grounded in fear for the risks and negative consequences of reoffending. Although this fear may be a powerful catalyst for intentions to develop, avoidant motives and *avoidance goals* involving a *passive responsibility* are probably not powerful enough to hold on and to resist criminal temptations. Facing powerful temptations is difficult when intentions are merely grounded in deterrence and especially when the individual is confronted with situations of low risk of penal consequences (Ward & Maruna, 2007; Sullivan & Rothman, 2008). It is therefore suggested that for lasting change and maintenance of altered behaviours, intentions need to be supported by *approach* motives or higher level goals.

Research literature suggests that intentions to personal reform involve: (a) rational and conscious considerations grounded in (*self*)-*reflective* capacities of the individual. Self-reflection includes attributions and judgments, for instance of moral responsibility. Intentions may also involve judgments of a conflict between higher level goals and viscerally motivated behaviours or implicit behavioural strategies that

are supportive of continued offending, (b) sufficient self-belief (personal control or self-efficacy) that one is able to resist future temptations to breaking the law as well as some confidence about supportive circumstances (institutional, familial and peer structures) offering opportunities to personal reform (Bandura, 1986; Burnett, 2004, Baer, Manning, & Izard, 2003).

Desistance and the role of higher level goals

According to Ward and Maruna (2007) 'goals are desired states or situations that individuals strive to achieve or to avoid, and as such are important components of personality' (p.146). Support for the relevance of goal- or goods-seeking behaviour comes from the self-regulation literature (Austin & Vancouver, 1996). They have their origin in basic human needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Previous research shows a relationship between the process of (successful) natural desistance and the discovery by the individual of important higher level goals (Maruna, 2001; Giordano et al., 2002). These goals are grounded in (moral) values. Of particular importance here are approach goals (strengths or personally endorsed adaptive goals). To transform his life the individual particularly needs these approach goals or good reasons for change. Approach goals offer a sense of purpose to life and they are grounded in opportunities for promoting primary human goods, e.g. relatedness, agency, mastery, inner peace (emotional regulation), creativity, excellence, life-health (Ward & Maruna, 2007).

The relationship of desistance intentions with good reasons or higher level life goals for change may be seen as the blue-print for laying claim to an adaptive, conventional personal identity or 'another non-criminal and normal Self'. This other, normal Self is probably the most powerful cognitive incentive for offenders to embark on a process of personal reform and to resist the many temptations activated by processes of implicit behaviour regulation. As Meisenhelder (1982, p.140) concludes: 'The plan to exit from crime is in large part founded on the sense of self as noncriminal.'

Good reasons or approach motives to desist merge with components or beliefs of the offender about the *moral* and social acceptability of criminal activity. Offenders who decide to desist and to act prosocially also tend to be motivated to achieve social acceptance (relatedness), respect from others and a sense of integrity. They are also driven by moral values and they decide to act (or not to act) in accordance with one's sociomoral reasoning. Without a certain sociomoral maturation and a

belief in the legitimacy of sanctioning and the wrongfulness of their criminal acts, it is unlikely that offenders will be able to achieve desistance and personal reform for a sustained period of time. Positive attitudes toward crime and an oppositional stance toward the sanctioning system will probably provide them with reasons that can deflect any active personal responsibility and undermine attempts at self-regulation when coping with adversity, social pressures and temptations. I suggest that desistance, defined as the (gradual) movement out of crime is also an exercise in moral, responsible behaviour and, somewhere in the interplay between implicit and explicit strategies of behaviour, it involves the triggering of *conscience* with morally reflected appraisals and self-judgments of the individual.

Bringing intentions into practice: the role of proactive capabilities and willpower

It is one thing to develop desistance intentions and to decide that one is going to exit from a criminal lifestyle, it is quite another thing to bring this intention into practice and to hold on. This means that the individual's resolution must be actually carried through by the decision to act in accordance with intentions supported by important higher level approach goals.

Orientation on and acting in accordance with approach goals implies the use of *proactive, goal-setting capabilities* and taking active responsibility. Proactivity is grounded in the need for *self-determination* and to make things happen. It is an executive capability driven by reflected autonomous and value-based choices oriented at securing primary goods. Proactive goal-setting capacities include *decisions to exert or allocate willpower* and to stick to important goals during the process of desistance. Allocation (or possession) of requisite levels of willpower is needed to carry through with intentions and plans. In general it is seen as rather senseless to 'decide' to quit harmful activities without a certain willingness to exert a required amount of willpower.

According to Loewenstein (2000, p. 61) willpower is 'a resource that can be used to decrease or eliminate discrepancies between viscerally motivated and deliberately desired behaviours.' Willpower represents attempts to suppress viscerally motivated behaviours or implicit behavioural strategies that conflict with higher goals. Willpower is at the same time a constrained resource demanding an efficient use. It must be allocated selectively between alternative uses (Loewenstein, 2000). Therefore, exerting willpower is preceded by a decision of allocation.

The exercise of willpower is always immediately aversive, it means performing a course of action

that has direct adverse hedonic consequences and a sacrifice of immediate utility (happiness, pleasure, comfort). The individual chooses for this action because he consciously decides that the viscerally motivated behaviour conflicts with more important goals (Loewenstein, 2000).

From this point of view, willpower is seen as an explicit behavioural strategy to suppress implicit, hedonic, behavioural responses or strategies (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). The allocation of willpower and the sacrifice of the immediate utility of criminal options become particularly important when faced with adversity during the stage of maintenance of altered prosocial behaviours.

Facing adversity and the role of willpower

The concept of willpower may be particularly relevant for the stage of maintenance of changed behaviours during the desistance process.

Maintenance involves the ability of offenders to stick to newly adopted prosocial cognitive scripts and behavioural routines.

For many desisting offenders who embark on a trajectory of prosocial action, coping with conditions or *environments of adversity* may be a potential threat to the development and maintenance of altered behaviours. Adversity in the life of desisting offenders refers to problems as not (immediately) getting the promised accommodation or job (sometimes because of the status of ex-offender), interpersonal conflicts, divorce, social exclusion, mental problems, financial problems and stigmatisation (Nelissen, 2003; Byrne & Trew, 2008). When these life problems block positively valued goals, offenders may experience negative and antagonistic emotions that (re)activate the push and pull mechanisms associated with ambivalence and opposing cognitive scripts either pro or contra continued offending.

The level of *resistance* offered by offenders to this push and pull mechanism depends on the strength of their belief of crime as an inappropriate or morally unacceptable way of coping with situations of adversity in their life (Maruna, 2001). The less one believes that crime is a (morally) acceptable way of coping with life problems and the more one believes that continued offending *conflicts* with important and personally endorsed prosocial goals, the more offenders will be resistant and be able to allocate required levels of willpower when faced with (un) anticipated adversities.

Experiencing stress related to adversity during the stage of maintenance may be followed by two types of reactions, either by the *disarming of willpower* or by *reorientation*. The disarming of willpower

involves abandoning one's approach goals, giving up internalised control and indulging to temptations ('a what the heck effect', Loewenstein, 2000). Reorientation (Breese, Ra'el, & Grant, 2000) involves an explicit and conscious decision to reallocate and intensify willpower in order to resist implicit automatic responses and the temptation of continued offending. In addition, successful desisters may use more resilient and effective coping or problem-solving strategies (seeking social support or help) that not only reduce or eliminate the intensity of the viscerally motivated behaviours but that also reduce the need for willpower (see for the role of resiliency: Rungay, 2004).

Empirical support for the role of willpower in maintaining altered behaviours and resisting temptations may for instance be found in the subjective accounts of desisting offenders (Nelissen, 2003). When asked retrospectively to characterise the road to their success many successful desisters experienced the process of desistance as a *struggle* or: 'a bitter pill to swallow', 'pumping or drowning', 'to work or doing time', 'a struggle to get my life rearranged'. Some desisting offenders not only struggled with mastering the behavioural routines of conventionality, they particularly struggled with the visceral thrills and hedonic aspects associated with a criminal lifestyle. For them the *unlearning* of a criminal habit and the *sacrifice* of its immediate utility (happiness, pleasure, comfort) was the main barrier to overcome (Nelissen, 2010).

Higher level approach goals and the proactive goal-setting capacity of the individual seem to be situated at the heart of desistance from crime and its explicit and conscious strategies for action. These decision-theoretical concepts may be integrated in a research model alongside with other concepts derived from Informal Social Control Theory, General Theory of Crime, General Strain Theory and deterrence. In the next section this framework will be described and empirically validated.

Methods

Research strategy

Independent, intervening and control variables correlated with the dependent variables are used for logistic and linear regression analysis. To answer the question for *whom* certain factors are supportive for desistance, ANOVA analysis is used to compare the mean scores of different age groups of the sample.

Data

The data for this study were taken from an evaluation study of six safety houses in the Dutch province of Limburg (Nelissen, 2010). Safety houses

in the Netherlands are local organisations working together to reduce crime. Within the safety houses criminal justice organisations, municipalities, social service departments and organisations for mental health care participate in a network system aimed at achieving better coordinated (better integrated and more complete) penal and rehabilitative interventions.

A sample of 90 mainly repeat offenders was followed during a period of four years, i.e. from 2007 until 2011. Data were gathered among offenders and process and case managers participating in the safety houses using a semi-structured instrument (the Addiction Severity Index, Hendriks, Van der Meer, & Blanken, 1991), in-depth interviews, questionnaires and document analysis.

Participants

Respondents were between 16 and 53 years of age ($M = 29$) and 93% are male. A large majority (80%) of them are unmarried and 67% have no partner. About one third of respondents are parents of one or more children.

About six out of ten respondents had parents who were divorced. At the time of the first interview 37% of the respondents were detained. Those who were not detained included offenders awaiting trial or were convicted (ex) offenders adopted by the safety houses for reasons of high risk and prevention. Officially reported data show a mean number of seven convictions up to 2007 and a mean career duration of more than nine years. Prior to the first interview 47% of respondents lived with their parents, partner and/or children, or other family members. More than half of the interviewed persons lived alone or at varying, unstable addresses. During the month preceding the interview or the current detention only 29% were employed on a steady or regular basis. In the field of accommodation, income, social relations, drug dependency, psychoemotional wellbeing and cognitive-behavioural skills, a majority suffer from moderate to serious problems. For 47% of the respondents chronic financial problems are mentioned as the most important reason for their criminal activity. Overall, 60% mention this as of importance to a varying degree.

Measures

Independent variables refer to the accumulated human and social capital and experiences with the criminal justice system. They include the following measures.

Self-control, a concept derived from the General Theory of Crime (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990), is measured by *impulsivity* (four items, Cronbach's α .68) and *risk-seeking* (four items, Cronbach's α .83) (Arneklev, Grasmick, & Bursik, 2000).

(Self)-reflective capacity (Cronbach's α .66) is constructed by three items reflecting the level of understanding of the individual of his/her own role in conflicts, reactions of other people towards the individual and a poor sense of control of their own life.

Passive coping behaviour (Schreurs & Van de Willige, 1988) is measured by seven items (Cronbach's α .83) representing reactive patterns of depression, drug use, flight, isolation, puzzling and powerlessness when faced with problems.

Motivation for change is based on a clinical assessment using five response alternatives ranging from none/poor to good or very good.

Variables referring to informal social control theory (Sampson & Laub, 1993) involve the *bonds with family or other persons important to the offender* and *bonds related to work or school*. Bonds with family or other persons are measured by two separate variables, i.e. the offenders level of satisfaction with his/her present *social* life circumstances and the number of persons in the social network giving support to the offender when faced with problems or setbacks. Bonds related to work or school are assessed by the number of days working or going to school during the month preceding the interview or incarceration.

The *psychoemotional wellbeing* of the offender reflects the strain theoretical perspective of negative emotions that mediate the relationship between strain and deviant behaviour (Agnew, 1992). The variable psychoemotional wellbeing uses five response alternatives to measure the *need for professional help* offenders express regarding their reported complaints that include feelings of fear, anger, depression and suicidal thoughts.

Experiences with the criminal justice system is used as a variable to measure the deterrent effect of the accumulated experiences with the criminal justice system. The greater the volume of previous convictions or incarcerations the more likely a development of desistance. This variable is assessed by the officially reported number of previous convictions and the self-reported number of preceding detentions.

The dependent variable of desistance is measured by subjective account, self-report and official data. The *subjective account of desistance* reflects the offender's assessment of the development of his criminal activity during the past years and uses scores ranging from decreasing (score 0) to no change or increasing (score 1).

The *self-report measure of desistance* regards the offender's information about his offence frequency during the preceding six months which covers the committing of zero offences, one or some offences or a pattern of weekly or daily offending and uses scores ranging from zero to three. A lower score on this continuous variable is interpreted as an indication of a pattern of desistance.

The *official measure of desistance* covers a trend of decrease, no change or increase during a three-year adoption period of the safety houses relative to a three-year period prior to adoption and uses scores ranging from zero (decreased) to one (no change or increased).

Lower scores on these variables are used as indications of a development of desistance. For all three dependent variables it is hypothesised that they are related to theoretically relevant desistance markers in the accumulated human and social capital. Moreover it is hypothesised that the perception of a long-term development of a declining (or unchanged/increasing) pattern of offending is reflected in and correlates with the other two self-report and official measures.

Goal-setting behaviour (Cronbach's α .69) as an **intervening decision variable** is measured by five items involving the ability to set goals, reflecting about future personal development, the setting of unattainable goals, not knowing what one really wants with one's life and giving up easily when confronted with difficulties or adversity. Goal-setting behaviour is rather neutrally formulated as a largely stable, but not fixed capacity across the life course that reflects *proactive capabilities*.

Beliefs of the offender about the moral acceptability of his offense behaviour, also an **intervening variable**, is measured by one item (how do you consider your own criminal activity?) and uses four response alternatives ranging from (strongly) disapproves, neutral to approves. This variable reflects the offender's orientation towards crime. It is a variable with a moral connotation and an indirect link with moral reasoning and higher level, ethical goals. In addition it is hypothesised that better goal-setting abilities are positively correlated with stronger self-efficacy beliefs related to desistance (measured by one item using five response alternatives ranging from not confident at all to very confident) and disapproval of offenders of their own offending behaviour.

Control variables are *age*; *accommodation problems* measured by the offender's perception of the frequency and level of suffering from problems with accommodation (two items, Cronbach's α .91); *income*

problems (three items, Cronbach's α .77) measured by the offender's perceptions of the instability of the financial household and the frequency and level of suffering from these problems; *addictive behaviours (drugs and alcohol)* measured by items regarding the perceived frequency and level of suffering and the perceived need for professional help.

Results

When the relationships between the independent variables and the subjective account of desistance were examined without the intervening variable of goal-setting behaviour, *risk-seeking behaviour* and *prior convictions* remained as significant predictors for the subjective account of desistance. When goal setting is added to the equation, risk seeking is no longer a significant predictor indicating that risk-seeking behaviour is fully mediated by goal-setting behaviour. In Table 1 the final results of regression analysis are presented. The subjective account of desistance is significantly predicted by goal-setting behaviour and the deterrent role of prior convictions. With one point increase of problems with goal-setting or proactive abilities, the odds of a perceived development of unchanged or growing criminal involvement increases by 53%. The findings also indicate that the odds that a person perceives a development of unchanged or growing criminal involvement decreases by 25% when the number of

prior convictions increases by one conviction. The model is significant.

Linear regression analysis of the self-report measure of desistance results in four significant predictors, *satisfaction with the social situation*, *moral beliefs about offending*, *risk-seeking behaviour* and *problems with drugs*. The more offenders are dissatisfied with their social situation, are seeking risks, are approving of their own criminal activity and experience more severe problems with drugs, the less they show indications of desistance, i.e. the more frequently they were engaged in criminal activity during a six-month period prior to the first interview or incarceration. The regression model is significant and it explains 47% of the variation in the dependent variable.

Logistic regression analysis for desistance measured by official data results in three significant predictors. Two of them are the control variables problems with drugs and income. The third significant predictor is goal-setting behaviour. With one point increase of problems with goal-setting abilities the odds of a development of no change or growing criminal involvement during the adoption period of the safety houses increases by 65%.

As hypothesised, the self-report and official measures of desistance are significantly correlated

Table 1 Results of regression analysis on three desistance measures

Dependent variable	Subjective account				Self-report			Official report			
	B	SE	Wald	EXP (B)	B	SE	Beta	B	SE	Wald	Exp (B)
Age	-.04	.05	.76	.95	NS	NS	NS	-.02	.06	.22	.97
Officially reported convictions	-.28	.12	5.52	.75*	NS	NS	NS	-.13	.10	1.70	.87
Incarcerations (self- report)	.08	.11	.51	1.08	NS	NS	NS	.11	.13	.65	1.11
Number of days working	.49	.25	3.77	1.63	NS	NS	NS	-	-	-	-
Accommodation problems	.10	.20	.26	1.11	NS	NS	NS	-.07	.16	.22	.92
Problems with income	.04	.15	.06	1.04	NS	NS	NS	.56	.19	8.25	1.75**
Drug problems	.12	.11	1.23	1.13	0.05	.01	.32**	-.30	.12	5.78	.73*
Self-reflection	-.36	.24	2.18	.69	NS	NS	NS	-	-	-	-
Risk-seeking behaviour	.22	.14	2.52	1.25	0.7	.03	.24*	-	-	-	-
Need for help with psychoemotional problems	.31	.41	.58	1.37	NS	NS	NS	-	-	-	-
Satisfaction with social situation	.35	.25	1.93	1.42	.18	.04	.43***	-	-	-	-
Goal setting	.42	.18	5.65	1.53*	NS	NS	NS	.50	.17	8.05	1.65**
Moral beliefs about offending	-	-	-	-	.29	.12	.24*	.64	.63	.22	1.91
	χ^2 (-df) = 32.88 (12)* Nagelkerke R2 = 0.61 -2 log likelihood = 40.11 Method = Enter				R2 = .47 Df = 4 F = 10.33*** Method = Forward			χ^2 (df) = 31.74 (8)*** Nagelkerke R2 = 0.60 -2 log likelihood = 41.55 Method = Enter			

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

with the subjective account of long-term development of criminal activity. The more often offenders believe their offence behaviour decreased in the long term, the lower their self-report criminal activity during the recent past ($R = 0.62^{**}$) and the more often the official reported criminal activity during the adoption period of the safety houses shows a decrease in convictions relative to the period prior to adoption ($R = 0.26^*$). As hypothesised, better goal-setting abilities are positively correlated with stronger self-efficacy beliefs related to desistance ($R = 0.50^{**}$) and with disapproval of offenders of their own offending behaviour ($R = .030^*$). For reasons of limited space these correlations are not presented in a table.

In **Table 2** the results of the comparison of mean scores of four age groups on relevant variables are presented.

Compared with the age groups of 22 years or younger and 23-28 years, the oldest group of 38 years or older has significantly less persons giving support to the offender. Offenders aged from 23-28 years and 29-37 years express a greater need for help compared with the youngest group. Offenders between the age of 29-37 are significantly more inclined to passive coping strategies compared with the youngest offenders. Also their goal-setting abilities are significantly less adequate compared with offenders younger than 29 years. Motivation for change shows a steady increase when offenders grow older. The oldest group is significantly more motivated for change than the youngest group. Offenders older than 29 years experience significantly more problems with drugs than the youngest group of offenders.

Discussion

The previous findings show that when desistance is conceptualised as a long-term development and measured either by the subjective accounts of offenders or by official data, goal-setting behaviour is a significant predictor. Apparently, the gradual

development of a declining pattern of offending is related to proactivity and the growing ability to subordinate impulses to value-based choices related to higher level approach goals. The effect of risk seeking as an impulse variable is fully mediated by goal-setting behaviour. This is an important finding. It shows that the exercise of internalised control during the process of desistance is the result of consciousness and a decisional choice to proactive behaviour in order to subordinate implicit and viscerally motivated behaviours to higher level goals (see also Wikström & Trieber, 2007).

When desistance is conceptualised from a short-term, situational perspective and measured by recent self-report offence frequencies a different pattern emerges. Lower levels of criminal involvement are best predicted by variables inhibiting criminal activity, such as a more satisfying social situation with more positive social bonds, less thrill- or risk-seeking behaviour, less severe problems with drugs and morality expressed as a more disapproving attitude of offenders towards their own offending behaviour. The latter predictor illustrates the relevance of moral reasoning and its role for the engagement in acts of crime. One of the interviewed offenders clarified his score on this moral predictor as follows: *‘Although I know stealing is wrong, I don’t regret or disapprove of my own criminal acts of stealing, I made a deliberate choice to commit them, I reflected on it and next it was just a matter of switching the button, to stop thinking and doing it.’* In addition, this repeat offender says that his main motive to commit crime was his need for a life of comfort and luxury. And, as he remarks, to hold on with desistance would be difficult for him as long as he believes that opportunities to get access to legitimate ways of earning a good living are severely restricted.

Behind the predictors of these short-term fluctuations in offence frequency and movements in or out of crime there may lay a more latent and gradual long-term change that in its turn is predicted by particular developmental or maturational factors such as for

Table 2 Comparison of mean scores for different age groups in the sample

	≤22 years n=30	23-28 years n=18	29-37 years n=18	≤38 years n=22	Total
Number of persons giving support**	3.3 (2.2)	3.5 (1.9)	1.9 (1.8)	1.5 (1.2)	2.6 (2.0)
Need for help with psycho-emotional problems**	2.4 (1.5)	3.3 (.85)	3.4 (.82)	3.1 (1.0)	3.0 (1.2)
Passive coping**	11.4 (4.5)	12.0 (3.9)	16.4 (4.9)	12.6 (3.0)	12.9 (4.5)
Goal-setting behaviour*	8.8 (2.2)	8.5 (3.3)	12.0 (4.3)	10.0 (2.9)	9.8 (3.5)
Motivation for change*	1.4 (1.0)	1.5 (.85)	1.9 (.96)	2.1 (1.0)	1.7 (1.0)
Problems with drugs **	4.0 (4.0)	6.3 (5.1)	10.5 (5.6)	8.8 (5.9)	7.0 (5.6)

Values are presented as means with the standard deviation in brackets. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

instance a growing proactive capacity and moral readiness to steer one's life in a desired, conventional direction.

The desistance measures introduced in this study demonstrate their utility not only by their relationship with the intervening decision-theoretical variables but also by their relationship with other predictors that prior research identifies as relevant for desistance, such as factors related to self-control (risk taking), cognitive and reflective capacity, social relationship quality, work-related bonds, strain reflected in psychoemotional wellbeing and deterrence. The significant role of control variables referring to 'life problems' with drugs, income and housing may also be in line with strain theory, with positively valued goals having been blocked, positively valued stimuli removed, or negative stimuli presented. These life problems may cause negative feelings which in turn lead to continued offending.

The findings resulting from comparing mean scores of the various age groups on relevant variables show that continued offending after the age of 30 is marked by reduced levels of goal-setting abilities compared with younger age groups. Also a pattern of more passive coping behaviour, reduced levels of social support, more severe levels of psychoemotional suffering and drug dependency may be discerned among older offenders. These findings probably reflect a problematic adjustment to life-course challenges. Poor adjustment may in part be related to a lack of resiliency and to reduced levels of proactivity when confronted with the demands of the various stages of human development.

The fact that by the age of 28 most offenders (85%) seem to stop offending (Blumstein & Cohen, 1987) may be accounted for by increased motivation of offenders to meet the life-course challenges of the developmental stage of (young) adulthood. As they have noticed that time and opportunities are running out for them more and more, their orientation to important life goals or primary goods increases. This may trigger active and moral responsibility to adjust to the demands of this stage of human development and encourage desistance.

Continued or increased offending at older ages may perhaps be accounted for by a combination of poor or dismantled levels of (previously) accumulated human and social capital that block the achievement of important primary goods and life goals. This eventually leads to the building up of negative emotions including anger, frustration, disappointment, depression and fatalism. Continued criminal offending at older ages and a relative lack of 'agentic' and proactive moves toward desistance

may be seen as a way of negative coping with and giving up control of problems that are essentially rooted into a poor adjustment to (previous) life-course challenges. As a consequence, continued offending at ages older than 30 may be accompanied by periods of a 'what the heck' attitude and of giving up control and the disarming of willpower. The data of this study suggest that this 'what the heck effect' of disappointment and giving up control probably occurs among the older offenders of ages between 29 and 37 years. They show significantly more problems with proactive goal setting and they suffer more from passive coping with adversity. These findings are in line with other results of research on willpower which indicate that phases of development of harmful and risky activities (crime and drug addiction) vary in the loss of volitional control over these activities and that desisting requires an ever greater exercise of willpower and proactive capacities in later stages (Loewenstein, 2000).

By the time repeat offenders reach the age of 40 or older, problems with proactivity lessen as they probably grow tired with the burdens and the accumulated costs of a criminal and addictive lifestyle. Also for this hypothesis the data offer some support. The oldest group of offenders show better goal-setting capacities and less passive coping behaviours compared with offenders in the beginning of their thirties. And perhaps this change in proactive behaviour is triggered by the growing experience of crime and its negative consequences as aversive. At the same time older offenders seem motivated for change. Motivation for change increases with age. In addition, for older persisting offenders in the beginning of their thirties the fundamental problem is probably also one of, what Laub and Sampson (2006) define as, a *distorted sense of autonomy* referring to limited capabilities, sociocultural opportunities and decisional choices to value and secure the primary human good of *relatedness* and bonding. This relative lack of sensitivity to the human good of relatedness may hamper changes in the *affective* component of criminal involvement and block the unfolding of desistance defined as a process of capitalising on an attitudinal shift.

Conclusion

In this study two tasks were previously formulated, i.e. finding meaningful measures of desistance and formulating a framework that specifies relevant factors and explains why, how and for whom these factors are supportive of desistance.

As to the first task, the research findings suggest that using a combination of measurement approaches, each with different strength, is a fruitful and informative strategy. A great deal of desistance

research examines officially reported data, but these data are subject to biases associated with for instance law enforcement policies. Especially with repeat offenders there may be a large discrepancy between officially reported convictions and the fluctuations in and volume of the actual involvement in crime. In order to get an impression of movements in or out of crime on the level of individual offenders it is therefore also interesting to measure change in patterns of offending by subjective and self-report instruments (Farrington, 2003). The research findings suggest that using a combination of measurement approaches, each with different strengths, is a fruitful and informative strategy.

As to the second task of specifying factors that are important to understand and to support desistance this study offers a number of important clues. An important clue to the understanding of the process of desistance is the role of value-based and (morally) reflected decisions by offenders in the initiating and maintenance of movements out of crime. Interventions may assist offenders in making these decisions by helping them to discover valued approach goals that inspire to goal-directed actions. This finding is in line with results from health studies emphasising that chances of success decrease dramatically when people do not *reflect, set goals and make plans* on the change of their behaviour and of the maintenance of the changed behaviour (Loewenstein, 2000; Gollwitzer, 1999; Armitage & Arden, 2008; Sullivan & Rothman, 2008). Valued approach goals (or the absence of them) are also important in the experience of offenders themselves. One of the interviewed offenders summarised his basic problem as '*not being able to discover good reasons to choose for a normal life without crime*' (Nelissen, 2010). Therefore, supporting the process of desistance should start with teaching offenders to reflect on issues of personal identity, desired primary goods and legitimate ways of securing them.

Although goal-seeking behaviour as an explicit technique of self-regulative planning seems to be situated at the heart of desistance as a decisional process, it is not the only clue to support desistance. Equally important are for instance efforts at enhancing supportive circumstances (institutional, familial and peer structures) offering resources for bonding (or social inclusion) and for the acquiring of the requisite technical and coping skills associated with a conventional behavioural repertoire. Also these forms of support that refer to the theoretical concepts accounting for the role of sociocultural context and structurally mediated processes may strengthen explicit strategies for action and *internalised control*.

It is further suggested that a focus on the theoretical and empirical body of criminological research on desistance may offer an opportunity to bring back criminology in a field that has currently become dominated by a risk factor prevention paradigm. This latter paradigm fails to account properly for key facets such as personal agency, intentionality, sociocultural context or barriers, moral development, psychological motivation and human rights dimensions (O'Mahoney, 2009). As a consequence the risk factor paradigm leads to interventions that, instead of *adding* to the individual's repertoire of personal and *social* functioning, merely seek to manage risks by controlling the outward behaviour of offenders. Interventions, however, must be grounded in the understanding of why offenders behave as they do. Criminological theories on desistance may offer a fruitful basis for this understanding. Building interventions on this knowledge about the causes of desistance is probably a more promising way to support offenders in their movement away from crime and to prevent long-term criminal careers with highly fluctuating levels of volitional control, ambivalence and repetitive movements from crime to non crime and back again.

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